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Relations of Central Asia with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization

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ABSTRACT

Comparing the influence of and relationship of Central Asia with the major regional bodies, the SCO is an advantageous organization for the economic development of Central Asia, since it is an opportune podium for doing business, especially with China, with a guarantee that Moscow nor Beijing will take a dominating stance against them. Due to a lack of armed forces among CSTO allies, Russia delivers the majority of the troops assigned under the banner of the CSTO. However, this also means that the Kremlin — in return for its security umbrella — demands a certain degree of political influence on the Central Asian member states of the CSTO. The less Central Asian countries are depending on Russia for political, economic/energy, or security reasons, the more they can pursue their national interests.

Introduction

This article analyzes the input of Central Asian states in the major organizations of this region, as well as the degree of influence that these organizations have on Central Asia. The leading bodies of this region on political, economic, and security cooperation are the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Turkmenistan conducts a permanent neutral policy, which prevents it from joining the aforementioned organizations, and hence will not be taken into account.

The SCO is an international organization for political, economic, and security cooperation. In addition to Russia and China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan are the current member states. Originally, Russia and China were the two leading nations in the SCO. However, since Russia mainly offers political-military cooperation, but China especially economic cooperation, which is more attractive for Central Asian states, the tendency is that China is becoming the primary

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leader within the SCO.¹ The CSTO is a military alliance, consisting of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan as member states. Uzbekistan has gone in and out the CSTO as a member state, not wishing its armed forces to be involved in collective (CSTO) military action. Russia is obviously the sole leader of the CSTO, considering its enormous military potential. The CSTO's main focus, also with collective forces and frequent exercises, is on Central Asia because of the threats of terrorism and narcotics, mainly emanating from Afghanistan. Although Russia is in the lead, the deviating policy of Uzbekistan, as well as the lack of support of the Central Asian states for the recognition of the Georgian separatist states in 2008, demonstrate that the Central Asian states follow an independent stance in this organization.²

I structure this article along the following research questions. What are the positions that Central Asian member states have taken in SCO and CSTO? What is the political and security weight of SCO and CSTO upon the Central Asian states and the Central Asian region? And, as an assessment, to what extent can Central Asian countries accomplish their own, individual interests in these organizations? This study centers on the positions between Central Asian states and SCO and CSTO. It does not analyze views of other member states of these organizations, with the exception of those of Russia and to a lesser extent China, considering their dominant influence on these organizations.

Central Asian positions in and on SCO and CSTO

Most Central Asian states, with the exception of neutral Turkmenistan, are active members of CSTO and SCO, with Russia (CSTO and SCO) and China (SCO) as lead nations. What are the viewpoints of the Central Asian member states vis-à-vis these two organizations?

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan's President Nazarbayev highly values its close cooperation with Russia, bilateral and through the regional organizations. In October 2015, when Russia's President Putin conducted a state visit to Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev explained the close ties as such that the relations are founded in the treaty 'On good neighborliness and alliance in the 21st century'. The bilateral alliance is secured by the CSTO. Further, according to Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan was, is, and will always be the closest and most reliable neighbor

¹For further details on the structure and activities of the SCO, see M. de Haas, 'War Games of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization: Drills on the Move!', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 29(3) (2016), pp. 379–381, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2016.1200383>.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 389–390.

of the Russian Federation, which in his view was in the fundamental interest of the people of Kazakhstan.³ Nevertheless, in spite of this intense Kazakh-Russian strategic partnership, Astana also develops good ties with China, through the SCO and bilaterally.

SCO

Regarding threats, Astana's security documents list the predictable threats of terrorism, extremism, and separatism, as well as drug trafficking.⁴ Predictable, since these are typical threats for a Central Asian state in the vicinity of Afghanistan, from where terrorism and drug trafficking originate. Predictable also because of Kazakhstan's membership of the SCO, which regards terrorism, extremism, and separatism as three threats to the sustainability of member states.⁵ In the context of its balanced foreign and security policy, Kazakhstan is well aware that Russia is a significant long-term partner, but the same applies to the other major player in the region, China. Along with Beijing and Moscow, Astana is part of the SCO. Whereas Kazakhstan can do business with Russia through the CSTO, the SCO is Astana's convenient forum to do so with China. For instance, in December 2014, Kazakhstan's Prime-Minister Karim Massimov received China's State Councillor Guo Shengkun in Astana. The sides discussed boosting cooperation in law enforcement and security areas, oil and gas pipeline security, counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics within the framework of bilateral mechanisms and the SCO's anti-terror center RATS.⁶

With common oil and gas interests, as well as joint concerns for an increase in terrorism originating from Afghanistan, there are joint issues for discussion in the framework of the SCO.⁷ Kazakhstan has taken an active stance on a number of agenda issues within the SCO. In February 2013, Kazakhstan's foreign minister, Erlan Idrissov, called on NATO to establish dialogue with the SCO, underlining that this organization was not an anti-NATO bloc and that its goals were benign.⁸ And in September 2014, during the SCO summit in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan's President Nazarbayev drew the attention of SCO countries to a number of urgent threats to regional security in order to assist in solving existing border issues,

³M. Rustem, 'Putin's State Visit Reconfirms Kazakh-Russian Strategic Partnership', *Eurasia & World*, 18 October 2015.

⁴*Voennoe doktrina Respubliki Kazakhstan*, 11 October 2011, http://mod.gov.kz/rus/dokumenty/voennaya_doktrina/ (accessed 7 November 2015); *Zakon o natsional'noy bezopasnosti Respubliki Kazakhstan*, 6 January 2012, http://mod.gov.kz/rus/dokumenty/zakony/vse_zakony/?cid=0&rid=281 (accessed 7 November 2015); *Foreign Policy Concept for 2014–2020*, 25 April 2014, <http://www.kazembassy.nl/index.php/en/about-kazakhstan/foreign-policy/foreign-policy-concept-for-2014-2020> (accessed 7 November 2015).

⁵M. De Haas, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Towards a Full-Grown Security Alliance?*, Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, The Hague, 2007, p. 8.

⁶Prem'yer-ministr Kazakhstana K. Masimov vstretilsya s chlenom Gossoвета KNR Go Shenkunem', *Russian.news.cn* (5 December 2014), http://russian.news.cn/china/2014-12/05/c_133834990.htm (accessed 17 March 2016).

⁷M. de Haas, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Towards a full-grown security alliance?*, 2007, pp. 5–6.

⁸'Kazakhs Urge NATO Dialogue With SCO', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 2 February 2013, www.rferl.org/content/kazakhstan-nato-sco-munich/24891375.html (accessed 1 February 2016).

as well as to ensure food supply security as one of the key areas of economic cooperation. In addition, he noted the pressing issue of water shortage in the region that affected the stability and security in the region.⁹

CSTO

In terms of its national interest of strengthening of peace through regional and global security, Kazakhstan actively participates in the CSTO. After Russia, Kazakhstan is the second-largest troop contributor to the collective forces of the CSTO. Hence, Kazakhstan's contribution to the CSTO is one of the major policy lines of its national interest of strengthening peace through regional and global security. In September 2015, at a high-level meeting of the CSTO, President Nursultan Nazarbayev emphasized that countering threats posed by international terrorist and extremist organizations was a priority for the CSTO, as well as the situation in Afghanistan, with increased militant activity in northern Afghanistan. Given the difficult situation in the region, Nazarbayev supported the idea of increasing the fighting capacity of the CSTO's Collective Rapid Reaction Forces (KSOR).¹⁰

In view of its energy security tasking, in August 2005 the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Anti-Terrorist Centre held an exercise around the Kazakh city of Aktau, while on the Caspian coast armed forces were to counteract terrorists that had seized an oil tanker.¹¹ In October 2007, the CSTO decided to form a CSTO Peacekeeping Force.¹² The first CSTO peacekeeping exercise was conducted in Kazakhstan in October 2012. This peacekeeping force is the only component to be deployed abroad. Kazakhstan contributes with a battalion.¹³ Kazakhstan is also an active participant in the CSTO's rapid reaction force KSOR. KSOR has currently 20,000 military, consisting mainly of Russian (an airborne division and an airborne brigade) and Kazakh (an air assault brigade) elite military units.¹⁴ From 18–22 August 2014, the CSTO's KSOR held joint military drills, 'Interaction 2014', in Kazakhstan.¹⁵ The CSTO also

⁹G. Kamalova, 'Nazarbayev Calls to Solve Boarder Security Issues at SCO', *Tengrinews*, 14 September 2014, http://en.tengrinews.kz/politics_sub/Nazarbayev-calls-to-solve-boarder-security-issues-at-SCO-256112/ (accessed 17 March 2016).

¹⁰Nazarbayev Concerned About Increased Militant Activity in Northern Afghanistan', *Tengrinews*, 16 September 2015, http://en.tengrinews.kz/politics_sub/Nazarbayev-concerned-about-increased-militant-activity-in-262137/ (accessed 17 March 2016).

¹¹I. Plugatarev, 'Karaul u truboprobodov mozhet prinyat ODKB', *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye (NVO)*, 9 June 2006; 'ODKB budet zashchishat' truboprovody', *Nezavisimaya Gazeta (NG)*, 16 June 2006; S. Blank, 'The Great Game Goes to Sea: Naval Rivalries in the Caspian', *Central Asia — Caucasus Analyst*, 11 January 2006.

¹²A.Gabuev and V. Solovyev, 'Gendarme of Eurasia', *Kommersant*, 8 October 2007, http://www.kommersant.com/p812422/CIS_CSTO_Russia_Lebedev/ (accessed 28 March 2015).

¹³R. McDermott, 'CSTO Stages First Peacekeeping Exercises', *Eurasia Daily Monitor (EDM)*, 16 October 2012. *Strategiya mirovvooruzhestva*, 3 May 2012, http://www.odkb-csto.org/information/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=163 (accessed 28 March 2015).

¹⁴R. McDermott, 'CSTO Proposes Cooperation With NATO on Afghanistan', *EDM*, 10 April 2012; 'CSTO Exercises Rapid Reaction Forces in Armenia', *EDM*, 18 September 2012.

¹⁵A. Satubaldina, 'Joint Military Drills of CSTO to Be Held in Kazakhstan', *Tengrinews*, 10 August 2014, <http://en.tengrinews.kz/military/Joint-military-drills-of-CSTO-to-be-held-in-Kazakhstan-255245/> (accessed 1 February 2016).

aims at a joint Air Defence System.¹⁶ In October 2014 seven CIS/CSTO member nations conducted a training of the Joint CIS Air Defence System; among them Kazakhstan.¹⁷ Thus, Astana is an active participant in the CSTO, both in exercises as well as in contributing to KSOR and other permanent structures. Clearly, Kazakhstan considers the CSTO as a vital organization for its security.

Kyrgyzstan

SCO

Bishkek's (security, energy, economic, and political) cooperation with Moscow comes prominently to the fore in its security documents. This cooperation with Russia is of vital importance for the survival of the government, since Kyrgyzstan is a politically weak state without energy resources. For the same reason, Bishkek also assigns much value to its cooperation in the Russian-led military alliance, CSTO, as well as within the SCO. The Kyrgyz Foreign Policy Concept considers '... Cooperation within the CIS, CSTO, the Eurasian Economic Community and the SCO ...' a national interest, and furthermore that '... Ensuring security is determined by Kyrgyzstan's participation in CSTO and SCO...'.¹⁸

CSTO

In June 2010, clashes broke out between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan. But a number of Kyrgyz requests to Russia and the CSTO for military assistance were rejected by Russian President Medvedev, allegedly because the problems of Kyrgyzstan had internal roots. CSTO chief Bordyuzha also called the violence a domestic affair.¹⁹ The reluctance of Moscow and the CSTO to interfere in this domestic unrest raised doubts about the value and effectiveness of the CSTO and about the Kremlin's reliability, at least for the regimes in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, whose survival depends to a high extent on Moscow's protection.

Russia has an airbase at Kant, near Bishkek and is allegedly mulling over the establishment of a second similar base in Osh, close to the border between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, by 2017. In February 2015, Russia announced rearmament of the airbase Kant with modernized aircraft. Kant, completely Russian, is a component of the CSTO's Collective Rapid Deployment Force. It is also involved in ensuring the security of the CSTO member countries, especially considering NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan.²⁰

¹⁶*Organizatsii ODKB*, <http://www.odkb-csto.org/structure/> (accessed 28 January 2016).

¹⁷'Sem stran SNG nachali sovmeštnyu trenirovku v ramkakh Obyedinnënoy sistemy PVO', *CA News*, 21 October 2014, <http://ca-news.org/news:1128220> (accessed 28 January 2016).

¹⁸*Kontsepsiya vneshney politiki KR*, 10 January 2007, <http://mfa-osh.kg/pravovayabase/1065-koncepciya-vneshney-politiki-kr.html#.Vgkle4voveQ> (accessed 7 November 2015).

¹⁹M. Elder, 'Kyrgyzstan Tests Russia's Regional Commitments', 15 June 2010, *GlobalPost.com*, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/russia/100614/kyrgyzstan-ethnic-violence> (accessed 28 January 2016).

²⁰V. Litovkin, 'Kirgiziya nadeyetsya na russkoye oruzhiye', *NVO*, 20 December 2013; I. Rotar, 'Conflicts Between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan Potentially Undermine CSTO and Custom Union in Central Asia', *EDM* 11(27) (11 February 2014); 'Rossiyskiy voennyi kontingent na aviabaze "Kant" budet uvelichen', *CA-News* (17 Februari 2015).

Tajikistan

SCO

Tajikistan's views on regional cooperation are similar to those of Kyrgyzstan. Dushanbe also has close cooperation with Moscow, securing the survival of this political weak state. Likewise, Tajikistan also highly values cooperation in CSTO and SCO. The Tajik Military Doctrine calls for '... Strengthening of (inter)national stability and security and preventing of armed conflict by coordinating military and defence policy, at the regional level within CSTO, SCO and CIS ...'. Likewise, the Tajik Foreign Policy Concept states that to ensure security '... priority cooperation is with (...) CIS, SCO and CSTO'.²¹

CSTO

Concerning Russian-Tajik military cooperation, in October 2013 Tajikistan ratified a deal to extend the presence of Russia's military base, the former 201st division, in Tajikistan until 2042. The military base, which stations 7,000 troops, is Russia's biggest military garrison abroad.²² In April 2015 Russia announced plans to increase the number of troops stationed in Tajikistan to 9,000 over the next five years and to provide more military equipment through 2020. The Russian army base in Tajikistan is also a component of the CSTO's collective rapid deployment forces KSOR and will in time of crisis give immediate support to the Tajik Armed Forces. In October 2015, Russia said to deploy attack and military-transport helicopters to beef up its military presence in Tajikistan amid rising insecurity in northern Afghanistan. The aircraft would be used to provide air cover for military columns, deliver airborne forces and cargo, and carry out reconnaissance missions and medical evacuation. However, in February 2016 the earlier announced ambitious plans of Russia to strengthen its military base in Tajikistan were turned back. The numerical strength of the military base was to be reduced and reorganized into a brigade in 2016, allegedly without loss of its combat capacity.²³

Concerning bilateral military aid, in April 2015, Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, said that Moscow would provide around USD 1.3 billion worth of military and technical assistance to Tajikistan within the next few years. Dushanbe faces growing threats in connection with the deterioration of the situation in neighboring Afghanistan, where Islamic State (IS) militants have appeared in addition to the traditionally present Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and the

²¹Voennoe doktrina Respubliki Tadjikistan, 3 October 2005, http://base.spinform.ru/show_doc.fwx?rgn=12243 (accessed 7 November 2015); Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki Respubliki Tadjikistan, 27 January 2015, <http://mfa.tj/ru/pravovaya-osnova-vp/kontseptciya-vneshney-politiki-respubliki-tadjikistan.html> (accessed 7 November 2015).

²²I. Rotar, 'Moscow and Dushanbe Strengthen Their Military Alliance', *EDM* 10(184) (16 October 2013).

²³Shoygu obsudil v Tadjikistane ukreplenie VS respublik, *RIA Novosti* (4 June 2015); 'Russia Announces Helicopter Reinforcements for Tajik Base amid Afghan Unrest', *RFE/RL* (7 October 2015); 'Rossiyskaya voyennaya baza pokidayet Tadjikistan?', *news-Asia.ru* (1 February 2016), <http://www.news-asia.ru/view/tj/9198> (accessed 24 February 2016).

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).²⁴ Russia confirmed its commitment to help Tajikistan strengthen its combat efficiency both within the framework of decisions of the CSTO and on a bilateral level, said Lavrov.²⁵ Given the fact that in February 2016 Russia announced a reduction of its military base in Tajikistan, a cut on the bilateral military support was also likely to take place. Tumbling commodity prices, especially of oil and gas, and the depressed Russian economy were having a serious impact, with consequences for Moscow's military presence in Central Asia as well.

The Russian and Tajik governments frequently stress threats that are allegedly posed by IS, Taliban, and other militants to Central Asia's nations. Conversely, Central Asian security experts doubt that these militants will go far from Afghanistan. Even if the Taliban would grow stronger, in their opinion it is unlikely that they will attempt an invasion of Central Asia.²⁶ For the Tajik Government, by presenting the country as at risk of incursion it can secure a steady flow of cash and weapons from Moscow, under the auspices of the CSTO, or directly by Russia. But just as with Bishkek, for Dushanbe too Moscow's help comes at a price: Tajikistan remains firmly under Russia's influence.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan conducts an independent course in its foreign and security policy, opportunistically swapping allies for its own benefit. Tashkent hosted a US military base near the Afghan border until relations deteriorated in 2005, due to perceived US interference in Uzbek internal affairs (i.e., concerning the so-called Andijan uprising). Then Uzbekistan rejoined the Russia-led CSTO, to abandon it once more in 2012. In February 2015, Uzbekistan renewed military cooperation with the USA and received 300 armored vehicles to patrol the Afghan border.²⁷ Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov has repeatedly stated that his country will never join any alliance similar to the former USSR. On 12 January 2015, he once more mentioned this policy line, at the first session of the new Uzbek Parliament's Legislative Chamber. Karimov's remarks were aimed at setting Uzbekistan apart from Putin's

²⁴The IMU has had links to Al-Qaeda. In the meantime IMU has officially declared its support for IS. IMU has 1,000 fighters and was seemingly allied to Al Qaeda. IMU operates out of the north of Afghanistan and conducts operations in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. IMU has for a long time focused on the fight against Central Asian authoritarian governments but now also concentrates on the recruiting of volunteers to fight in the Middle East. IMU is particularly active on the border with Afghanistan, where they joined the Taliban in skirmishes. Sources: 'Boeviki iz Tsentral'noy Azii vkhodyat v chislo starshikh komandirov IGLI i Fronta "An-Nursa"', *UN.org* (8 October 2015) <http://www.un.org/russian/news/ru/print.asp?newsid=24675> (accessed 16 November 2015); A. Dynner Legieć and K. Rękawek, *Ready to Go? ISIS and Its Presumed Expansion Into Central Asia*, PISM Policy Paper 19(121) (June 2015) pp. 1, 9–10.

²⁵'Rossiya predostavit Tadjhikistanu oruzhiya na 70 milliardov rubley', *Lenta.Ru* (3 April 2015); 'Rossiya uvelichit chislennyy sostav svoey voennoy bazy v Tadjhikistane', *CA-News* (3 April 2015).

²⁶E. Lemon, 'The Taliban and Islamic State Haunt Tajikistan', *EDM* 12(99) (28 May 2015).

²⁷J. Zenn, 'Kazakhstan and Neighbors Seek Strategies to Counter Emerging Threats', *CACI Analyst* (29 April 2015).

efforts to increase Moscow's influence on other former Soviet republics.²⁸ For the same reason Karimov had withdrawn from the CSTO in 2012, out of fear that Russia might affect its sovereignty. What remains is the SCO, which probably due to the dominating influence of China, rather than that of Russia, for Karimov continues to be a workable organization for cooperation.²⁹

SCO

As of 2003, Russia had the intention of establishing cooperation between CSTO and SCO. However, with the prospect of enhanced links between the CSTO and the SCO, Uzbekistan threatened to leave the SCO as a result of its aversion to the CSTO, which it had left in 1999. A second reason for Uzbekistan's resistance to having closer ties with the CSTO was its power struggle with Kazakhstan for hegemony over Central Asia. Thirdly, Uzbekistan spoke out against SCO military exercises on its territory, since it had preferred to conduct such exercises with NATO. As a result of this stance, in 2003, Uzbekistan, due to the CSTO's possible involvement in these maneuvers, refused to participate in joint SCO drills in Kazakhstan and China.³⁰ Uzbekistan usually does not participate in SCO military exercises, suggesting Tashkent continues to be reluctant to concede security planning to other SCO members and is sensitive to how such exercises could be viewed by the West. Uzbekistan has been willing to demonstrate its regional leadership by hosting the SCO's standing counter-terrorist committee RATS (Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure) as well as SCO Heads of State summits but is reluctant to consistently endorse other SCO activities, such as multilateral security drills. As with its (non-)participation in other regional organizations, Tashkent takes an independent, non-aligned position. However, Tashkent does have a special interest in the RATS of the SCO, which discusses topics covering combating extremism and developing joint operations against IS threats. While many Western governments believe that Uzbekistan in the past used the threat of terrorism to crack down on domestic dissent, the trans-national nature of IS represents a qualitatively different threat, demanding adequate measures.³¹

²⁸'Uzbekistan nikogda ne voydet ni v kakoy soyuz — Islam Karimov', *Tengrinews* (13 January 2015).

²⁹On 2 September 2016 Uzbekistan's President, Islam Karimov, died ('Islam Karimov: Uzbekistan president's death confirmed', BBC, 2 September 2016). Since then, his successor as President, Shavkat Mirziyayev, has taken a drastically different course in Uzbekistan's foreign and security policy. He aims at appeasing the neighboring states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—as well as strengthening ties with Russia. Considering this change of course, an increase of Uzbek involvement in the SCO, e.g. in military exercises, could be expected as well. Since Uzbekistan only suspended but not terminated its membership of the CSTO, it should not be excluded that Tashkent will return to active membership of this military alliance. Hence, under the new leadership of Mirziyayev, Uzbekistan is likely to play a more cooperative role in Central Asia instead of Karimov's antagonistic attitude (B. Pannier, 'Uzbekistan: The Suddenly Good Neighbor', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 4 October 2016).

³⁰S. Luzhanin, 'Na puti k 'Aziatskomu NATO', *NVO*, 26 May 2003. V. Mukhin, 'ShOS i ODKB obyedyayutsya', *NVO*, 25 June 2003.

³¹J. C. K. Daly 'Uzbekistan Could Seek Foreign Assistance Against Islamic State', *EDM* 12(74) (21 April 2015); J. Paraszczuk 'Uzbekistan Would "Cooperate With Russia" to Combat Domestic Security Threat by IS', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (RFE/RL) (13 April 2015).

At the SCO Dushanbe Summit of September 2014, Uzbek President Karimov once more demonstrated the ambivalent and independent nature of Uzbek regional and international politics. There, the Uzbekistani president met on the summit's sidelines with his Iranian, Russian, and Tajikistani counterparts. Uzbekistan's foreign policy, both bilateral and multilateral, was focused in the directions of Central Asia, Eurasia, and the Persian Gulf. Uzbekistan crucially needs safe transit routes to expand its foreign trade, which is a vital source of its state revenue. Consequently, Uzbekistan has quietly been pursuing an initiative to link Central Asia with the Gulf via the so-called Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman land, rail, and sea route. The SCO Summit was a fitting forum to pursue this objective. At the SCO summit, Karimov also met with Putin. Despite the difficult relationship, Russia remains Uzbekistan's largest foreign trade partner. Surprisingly, Karimov appeared to break with previous Uzbekistani policy regarding a resolution to the Ukraine crisis, which was criticizing Moscow, by now stating that Russian interests should also be taken into account.³² However, Karimov remained fearful that the SCO might develop into a wrong direction. Clearly, manifesting the ambivalence in Tashkent's attitude toward Moscow, at the SCO Ufa Summit of July 2015, Karimov stated that the SCO should remain outside any blocs, exclude any bloc-based policies, and not turn into a military-political alliance.³³

CSTO

Tashkent regards itself — by military and demographic might — as the leader of Central Asia, although Astana's economic power is much stronger. However, this national view of regional leadership affects its security documents by stressing its independent, non-allied position. For this reason, Uzbekistan has more than once withdrawn itself from the CSTO. Tashkent is fearful that its armed forces might be used by the CSTO for purposes in contrast with national Uzbek policy. Also, Tashkent is anxious about CSTO or other military deployment on its territory and therefore rejects the presence of foreign troops on its soil. Its refutation of the CSTO has also had consequences for Uzbekistan's position on the SCO. In 1999 Uzbekistan for the first time withdrew from the CSTO. However, Moscow managed to get Tashkent back into the CSTO, albeit temporarily. In 2005, until then a Western ally, Uzbekistan demanded that US forces leave the air base on its territory, as a result of US and European criticism of the suppression of unrest in Andijan by the Uzbek authorities earlier that year. Subsequently, Uzbekistan sought closer ties with Russia. On 23 June 2006, Vladimir Putin announced that Uzbekistan would (re)join the CSTO as a member.³⁴ Uzbek President Karimov's main argument for joining the CSTO

³²Z. S. Saipov, 'Uzbekistan Seeks to Reinvigorate Its Diplomatic Clout in the Region', *EDM* 11(175) (3 October 2014).

³³'Sammit SHOS stal dlya Putina tyazhelym ispytaniem', *Moskovsky Komsomolets* (10 July 2015), <http://www.mk.ru/politics/2015/07/10/sammit-shos-stal-dlya-putina-tyazhelym-ispytaniem.html> (accessed 18 February 2016).

³⁴V. Socor, 'Uzbekistan Accedes to Collective Security Treaty Organization', *EDM*, 27 June 2006.

was probably his need for Russian protection against regime change, such as had taken place in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005).³⁵ Nevertheless, Uzbekistan's position toward the CSTO remained ambivalent. On 4 February 2009, the CSTO agreed to create KSOR. However, Uzbekistan noted that it could not accept the provision whereby all special services, including emergency services, were to be part of the collective force. Subsequently, the CSTO Moscow summit of 14 June 2009 also demonstrated the unwillingness of Uzbekistan to adhere to Russia's wishes. Uzbek President Karimov signed the summit's documents with reservations attached, limiting Uzbekistan's participation in future CSTO activities.³⁶ Furthermore, as said, Uzbekistan's return to the CSTO in 2006 turned out to be only temporary. Karimov once more suspended Tashkent's participation in the CSTO on 28 June 2012. Possible reasons for Uzbekistan's renewed suspension of the CSTO include its steadfast resistance against the CSTO's KSOR, and the fact that this state prefers bilateral security ties to multilateral ones. Furthermore, Uzbekistan desired to be a key link in NATO's 2014 Afghanistan withdrawal, enabling it to receive military equipment/weapons left behind by NATO.³⁷ Since then, Uzbekistan has demonstrated growing concern about the terrorist threat from IMU and IS. Therefore, and in spite of his firm independent course, and having suspended Uzbekistan's membership of the Russian-led CSTO military alliance, President Karimov has asked support from Russia. In December 2014 Karimov approached his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, for assistance in combating the threat of extremism in Central Asia.³⁸ In August 2015, in spite of this rapprochement toward Putin, Uzbek President Islam Karimov once again declared that his country will never agree to let foreign states deploy military bases on its territory. He further stated that Uzbekistan will never join any military-political blocs and let its soldiers serve abroad.³⁹

Influence of SCO and CSTO on Central Asia

SCO

The SCO has developed itself from (originally) a border arms control-oriented organization, via a regional counter-terrorism body, to a truly international entity. However, evaluating the SCO, it is important to note

³⁵I. Plugatarev, 'Sozdayetsa Evrazijskaya Semerka', *NVO*, 28 October 2005.

³⁶'Uzbekistan Quietly Stalling on CSTO Collective Forces', *EDM* 6(115), 16 June 2009.

³⁷'Uzbekistan Suspends Membership in CSTO', *RFE/RL*, 28 June 2012; 'Uzbekistan Suspends Its Membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)', *Central Asia News*, 28 June 2012; V. Litovkin, 'Uzbekistan Wants American Weapons and Suspends CSTO Membership', *Valdai International Discussion Club / NG*, 6 July 2012.

³⁸J. C. K. Daly 'Uzbekistan Could Seek Foreign Assistance Against Islamic State', *EDM* 12(74) (21 April 2015); J. Paraszczuk 'Uzbekistan Would "Cooperate With Russia" to Combat Domestic Security Threat by IS', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (RFE/RL) (13 April 2015).

³⁹"Nashemu narodu nuzhny mir i spokoystvie" — Islam Karimov' gazeta.uz (31 August 2015), <http://www.gazeta.uz/2015/08/31/speech/> (accessed 17 December 2015).

that the cooperation among its members and observers to a great extent lacks common targets. The organization's wide-ranging agenda and diverse membership clearly weakens its potential capabilities. Within the SCO, member states and observers have their own agenda, based upon national instead of common interests. For example, China is seeking (Central Asian) markets for the products of its expanding economy and energy sources to keep its economy going, Russia is eager to regain its leadership status within the CIS, hence also in Central Asia, as well as that of a superpower in the international arena. And some of the Central Asian regimes consider the SCO, and especially the protection of Russia and China, as their guarantee for survival. This mixture of possibly divergent objectives demonstrates that the SCO member states do not have too much in common.

Divergent objectives are not limited to the aforementioned Sino-Russian relationship but are also found elsewhere within the SCO. For instance, at the time the relationship between Kazakhstan and China was also disturbed since the former caused a conflicting issue during the SCO drills 'Peace Mission 2007'. Kazakhstan, though a member of the SCO and a participant in the exercises, failed — either because of reluctance or lack of time — to pass legislation allowing foreign troops to cross its territory. The most direct route for the Chinese troops from Xinjiang to Chelyabinsk in central Russia would have been through Kazakhstan. Because of the fact that Kazakhstan did not allow the Chinese to cross its territory, the Chinese troops were forced to make a detour that resulted in a total distance to the Russian training ground of more than 10,000 km.⁴⁰ However, perhaps as an appeasing move and to demonstrate that the matter of allowing foreign troops to go across its territory should be solved in the near future, Kazakhstan offered to host the next SCO war games in 2008 or later.⁴¹ On the other hand, China and Kazakhstan have an intensive and solid cooperation in energy. And both states maintain favorable trade relations with the West. Both issues are likely to go against Russia's interests in these areas. Another issue is that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are each other's rivals for regional primacy. This was demonstrated in the 'Peace Mission-2012' drills, when Tashkent, itself not participating in the exercises, refused a request from Astana to allow Kazakh troops and hardware to cross its territory en route to northern Tajikistan. The Kazakh units had to make a detour through Kyrgyzstan to reach Tajikistan. This incident demonstrates that despite all the talk about the SCO's unity, the organization is still unable to resolve differences over such basic issues as military transit through member state territories.⁴²

⁴⁰V. Litovkin, 'Brosok na Chebarkul', *NVO*, 3 August 2007; N. Petrov, "'Peace Mission 2007" to Tackle Terror Threats', *RIA Novosti*, 24 July 2007; N. Petrov, 'Voyennyye gotovyatsya k "mirnoy missii-2007"', *RIA Novosti*, 23 July 2007; V. Litovkin, 'Kitayskaya intriga "Mirnoy missii-2007"', *NVO*, 1 June 2007.

⁴¹A. Tikhonov and V. Denisov, 'Ravnyye vozmozhnosti dlya vsekh', *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 17 August 2007.

⁴²A. Sodikov, 'SCO Peace Mission 2012: Lessons For Tajikistan', *CACI Analyst* (27 June 2012).

Therefore, as a result of opposing national interests, the current cooperation — as provided by the SCO — might change into disputes or even (armed) confrontation between participants, e.g., considering the often tense relations between upcoming member states India and Pakistan. What kind of consequences will that have for the unity within the SCO and its common stance? Most likely, the SCO will continue to be used as a convenient platform for bilateral (e.g., energy) deals between participants, not as a unified block with integrated structures and policies.

The SCO as a useful forum also applies to the Central Asian member states. The Central Asian states are expected to have a preference for acting within the SCO, since this entity is not dominated by a single country, Russia, as is the case with the CSTO. Furthermore, for the Central Asian SCO partners, the danger of being overruled by a tandem of Beijing and Moscow does not seem to be imminent. As described earlier, both powers have their own, independent interests. A contest between Russia and China is more likely than joint action by them against other SCO members. Moreover, the fact that the SCO consists of two Great Powers has also a mitigating effect on the actions of Russia and China toward, for instance, the Central Asian states. Both powers are likely to correct each other when one of them takes an action that the other disapproves. This correcting circumstance is beneficial for the Central Asian SCO partners. Hence overall, the SCO is an advantageous organization toward the economic development of Central Asia, since it is an opportune podium for doing business, especially with China, with a guarantee that neither Moscow nor Beijing will take a dominating stance against them.

CSTO

It would be too easy to simply regard the CSTO as an instrument of Moscow's security policy and part of Russia's security organization. Since its founding in 2002, this military alliance has developed a mature organizational structure, which, at least on paper, resembles that of NATO. Furthermore, the tasking of the CSTO has moved from classical collective defense to modern security threats, which is similar to NATO's conceptual development. In addition to the standing political and military command structure, the CSTO has already created, or is in the process of establishing, collective rapid reaction forces, collective peacekeeping forces, collective aviation forces, collective air defence, a crisis response center, and a partnership institute. Moreover, regular military exercises — which have increased considerably in recent years — aimed at conventional warfare, peacekeeping, anti-narcotics, counter-terrorism, and disaster relief, also gives evidence to the fact that the CSTO has become a professional security organization. To that extent, by improving the combat readiness of its armed forces, as well as

by providing a security umbrella, especially for the vulnerable states Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the CSTO forms a valuable military alliance for Central Asia.

However, at the same time it is clear that Russia dominates the CSTO. Russia's clout results not only from its own desire but also from the weak standing of its CSTO allies. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan depend on Russia for their survival against internal and external (mostly extreme-Islamic) threats. However, politically, CSTO allies do not always adhere to the Kremlin. For instance, Belarus and Uzbekistan have regularly refused Russia's plans for the CSTO, and the CSTO as such did not follow Moscow's recognition of the Georgian separatist states in 2008. Moreover, the CSTO has frequently met division among its allies, such as political disputes of Uzbekistan with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan, border skirmishes between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and Russia's annoyance at Central Asian energy deliveries to the West and China, which jeopardizes the CSTO's joint energy security tasking.⁴³ The positive side of disputes within the CSTO is that it shows that its members have their own opinion and do not necessarily follow the (Russian) party line. The negative side is that this demonstrates a lack of cohesion, which in turn diminishes the political clout of the CSTO.

Although Moscow's political influence is a matter of discussion, Russia's overwhelming military power in the CSTO is not. Russia has to bear the burden of troop delivery for the CSTO. KSOR is mainly Russian, a fact that also applies to the CSTO's peacekeeping force. Moreover, the regional Central Asian Group of Forces of the CSTO is mostly bilateral, again with Russian overweight. Hence, from the viewpoint of military power, Russia is the CSTO hegemon. Russia's one-sided military power limits the military output of the organization. The reluctance of the CSTO (and Moscow in particular) to interfere in the Kyrgyz revolt of 2010 is an example of this situation. The lack of political unity and Russia's military overweight reveal that the CSTO has still a way to go toward obtaining power projection capabilities to conduct foreign missions, such as in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the CSTO's unremitting initiatives on further integration, e.g., of armed forces, war games, procurement, and military education, demonstrate a willingness for cohesive political and military performance. Given the fact that the Central Asian armed forces are quite limited in size, thanks to operating and exercising with Russia, leading the aforementioned CSTO initiatives, Central Asia profits from Moscow's robust military power.

Current and developing threats might also strengthen the cooperation and boost the output of the CSTO. The warfare of IS in Syria and Iraq and the

⁴³For further details on border, energy, ethnic, and water disputes among the Central Asian states, see M. de Haas, 'Security Policy and Developments in Central Asia: Security Documents Compared with Security Challenges', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 29(2) (2016), pp 219–221, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13518046.2016.1168123>.

return of IS fighters to their home countries, including to Russia and Central Asia, could threaten domestic stability. Furthermore, the future of Afghanistan, after the withdrawal of most NATO/US forces in 2014, is also a reason for concern. In March 2015 a UN envoy reported that IS has moved into Afghanistan.⁴⁴ Cooperation between IS and the Taliban in Afghanistan could make these threats for Russia and Central Asia more imminent. However, due to a lack of (combat ready) forces among CSTO allies, for the time being Moscow has to bear the burden in any armed conflict conducted under the CSTO banner. This also means that the Kremlin — in return for its security umbrella — demands a certain degree of political influence on the Central Asian member states of the CSTO.

Future membership of the regional organizations

On the subject of the expansion of membership of the regional organizations, the following can be said. Concerning the SCO, India and Pakistan will soon be promoted from their observer status to full membership. For many years these countries have been eager to become members. But because India was supported by Russia and Pakistan by China, for a long time a deadlock remained between the two leading states of the SCO, preventing Pakistan and India to be uplifted to membership. If we consider observer status to be the ‘waiting room’ for membership, then Iran would be next in line. Teheran has also at length been interested in SCO membership but was on hold because of the UN sanctions against it, which is a reason for the SCO not to grant membership. Furthermore, the radical anti-Western statements of the previous president of Iran, Ahmadinejad, were not helpful in promoting Iran’s membership. However, with the international deal on Iran’s nuclear energy of 2015 and sanctions lifted, it cannot be ruled out that Iran will too be allowed to become a SCO member in the following years.⁴⁵ Membership for Afghanistan is less likely, due to the ongoing conflict in this country. Mongolia does not seem to be interested in membership. Belarus — already raised from dialogue partner to observer — might well be enthusiastic to become member. However, due to the close ties between Moscow and Minsk, China might not approve this step, which would strengthen Russia’s position in the SCO. Hence, further enlargement of the SCO after Pakistan, India, and possibly Iran is not very probable.

On the topic of the CSTO, Uzbekistan presents an interesting case when discussing membership. Uzbek President Karimov withdrew his country in 1999 and after rejoining the CSTO in 2006, again left this alliance in 2012. Karimov has consistently voiced suspicion against collective forces, bases,

⁴⁴OON: Gruppировка “Islamskoe gosudarstvo’ obonovalas” v Afganistane’, *Fergana News / TASS*, 17 March 2015.

⁴⁵U. Hashimova, ‘Future of the SCO Under Question After Tashkent Summit’, *EDM*, June 29, 2016.

and exercises of the CSTO, which allegedly might be used against its member states. He preferred bilateral security ties to multilateral ones, in particular not to be overruled by Moscow. Karimov's actions show that he wanted to maintain an independent stance, e.g., by cooperating with NATO, to receive military equipment/weapons left behind by NATO after leaving Afghanistan, but also by cooperating with Putin, asking Russia's support in combating terrorism. Although Afghanistan and Serbia joined the CSTO in 2013 as observers, as yet there are no signs that these states, nor any other, will be taken in as new member states of this military alliance.⁴⁶

Assessment

To what extent can Central Asian states accomplish their own, individual interests in SCO and CSTO? The level of freedom of Central Asian states to pursue their national interests varies within these two regional organizations. Their freedom of action is the biggest in the SCO. With two leading powers, Russia and China, that contest each other and are therefore incapable of unilateral ruling the other member states, the SCO is the best platform for Central Asian states; furthermore, the SCO has less demanding rules than the CSTO. The SCO is primarily a loose organization, providing a platform for bilateral arrangements for its members, and thus offers a lot of liberty for the Central Asian states. CSTO is under the control of Moscow, without Beijing as a counter-balance. Moreover, Russia's military superiority in the CSTO limits the freedom of movement of the Central Asian member states. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are both militarily and economically (including energy) reliant on Moscow, which further reduces the capability of fulfilling their national objectives. This situation is different for Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, who are not dependent on Russia for their security, and who hold their own energy resources. Other than the close political, economic, and military cooperation between Russia and Kazakhstan, under Karimov Uzbekistan followed an autonomous course from Russia, allegedly not willing to be part of a resurrection of the USSR under Moscow's rule. For that reason Uzbek President Karimov (more than once and currently) left the CSTO. However, this did not restrain Karimov from doing business with Putin as an independent actor. Consequently, if Central Asian countries are not tied to Russia for political, economic/energy, or security reasons, as Uzbekistan (and Turkmenistan) demonstrates, then they can pursue their national interests without serious interference from the Kremlin.

⁴⁶I. Urazova, 'Nazarbayev Concerned About Increased Militant Activity in Northern Afghanistan', *Tengrinews*, 16 September 2015, http://en.tengrinews.kz/politics_sub/Nazarbayev-concerned-about-increased-militant-activity-in-262137/ (accessed 23 August 2016).

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