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Russia's 'virtual cold war' in Central Asia

By Roger McDermott

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The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) summit in [Moscow](#) on February 3, followed the next day by the meeting of the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEc) was overshadowed by Kyrgyzstan's President Kurmanbek Bakiyev announcing the closure of the US Manas air base in Bishkek.

However, Moscow's increasingly assertive foreign policy within the former Soviet Union, including reasserting [Russia's](#) security credentials in the South Caucasus and Central Asia and what many regard as playing a role in the Kyrgyz decision to close the American base, was also apparent in declaring the formation of a "new" CSTO rapid reaction force, which Russia's President Dmitry Medvedev claimed will not be less capable than its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) counterpart.

The new military structure is designed to play a regional role as a "last resort" while it will not aspire to become a counterweight to NATO. Arguably this initiative, combined with elaborating new regional air defense ambitions, is calculated to restrict NATO's influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia promoting Russia's interests as Moscow conducts a "virtual cold war".

Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister, Grigoriy Karasin, clarified aspects of the new CSTO force on February 12.

"In peaceful conditions they will remain in their places of permanent stationing. In the event that a threat of aggression emerges in respect of CSTO states, as well as in order to quickly react to crisis situations, they would be redeployed in the direction of the threat on the basis of a decision by the Collective Security Council of the CSTO," Karasin said.

This would require presidential approval in each member state, acting only on the basis of consensus.

The CSTO rapid reaction forces

The structure which has existed on paper for several years will now be activated using national military sub-units, interior ministry special forces, other security agencies and units from emergency ministries. Russia will, of course, be the lead provider of military personnel to the CSTO rapid reaction capabilities, availing a division to its overall composition. The Central Asian members of the CSTO (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) will also contribute forces to the CSTO rapid reaction forces.

The pattern of CSTO military exercises indicates these will be mostly tasked with playing supporting roles, drawn from mobile formations and specialist units. In the case of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan their numerical input will be purely of token value.

Uzbekistan will earmark forces for participation in exercises and operations, but has no plans to locate formations in a permanent headquarters, should one emerge in the future. Moreover, Tashkent negotiated a special clause allowing a case-by-case assessment as to whether it would participate and is more reluctant than the other Central Asian CSTO members to become involved in non-military operations such as emergency tasks or responding to a natural disaster.

This is counterbalanced by the critical role within the region that Kazakhstan has chosen to play in developing and contributing to these forces. Astana will attach an airborne assault brigade to the CSTO collective rapid reaction force, drawn from its airmobile forces headquartered in Kapchagai.

Kazakhstan: Russia's gateway to Central Asia

It is from within these structures that Kazakhstan has developed its peacekeeping capabilities with US and NATO assistance, initially as a battalion (KAZBAT) and with additional cooperation from the Alliance this has been transformed into a brigade (KAZBRIG).

Both NATO and Russia have potentially conflicting interests in these structures. Moscow, in alliance with Astana through the CSTO, holds sway since Kazakhstan has legal obligations to prefer CSTO commitments, in contrast to its "partner" status with NATO's Partnership for Peace program.

Kazakhstan Defense Minister Daniyal Akhmetov asserted that this brigade is ready for the duties assigned to it under the CSTO, which puzzled many observers. "The Kazakh airborne assault brigade attached to the CRRF is ready for combat. It is equipped with advanced armaments and military hardware, as well as capable of fulfilling its mission. The Kazakh brigade will be a worthy component of the CRRF," Akhmetov said in Astana on February 12.

The other brigades in Kazakhstan's airmobile forces are equipped with Russian made weapons and equipment and their combat capability is not as high as its Western-trained KAZBRIG. If Akhmetov referred to the latter, it represents a serious blow to NATO objectives with Kazakhstan's armed forces, preparing an interoperable brigade for possible future deployment on international peace support operations: if the brigade belongs to one of the other airmobile structures, it will further limit Kazakhstan's NATO partnership action program goals. In a worst case scenario, NATO training for KAZBRIG may mostly benefit the CSTO.

Air Defense: Squeezing Western influence

Colonel-General Alexander Zelin, commander in chief of Russia's Air Force, said on February 10 that Russia and its allies are currently building regional air defenses in three directions: [East Europe](#), South Caucasus and Central Asia. Draft agreements, based on the unified air defense system between [Belarus](#) and Russia are now being prepared for other CIS members.

A unified CIS air defense system was first agreed on February 10, 1996, consisting of seven air defense brigades and 46 missile air defense units armed with S-125 S-75, S-200 and S-300 systems of various modifications, as well as 23 aviation units equipped with MiG-29, MiG-31 and Su-27 aircraft, 22 formations of radio technical troops and two electronic warfare units.

During the past 13 years, progress on integrating air defense within the CIS has been sporadic and often lacking genuine political will to implement such grand schemes amongst Russia's neighbors; [Georgia](#) exited early and Ukraine has proven ambivalent. Belarus proved one notable exception both preserving and strengthening its existing air defense capabilities and closely cooperating with Russia.

Russia has agreed on joint air defense combat duty with Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. General Zelin especially singled Russia's close ally in Central Asia, Kazakhstan, which has initiated the modernization and expansion of its air defense systems with Moscow's assistance and political support.

In order to realize these plans, efforts are underway to design "Zaslon", an automatization complex for command posts and the headquarters of the unified CIS air defense, in the context of bilateral programs. Moscow is considering supplying this system to Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Zelin stated that Russia's air force will be involved in any operation to defend a CIS member state; de facto asserting Russia's security suzerainty over the South Caucasus and Central Asia in particular.

On February 13 Nikolay Bordyuzha, secretary general of the CSTO, announced that Russia will set up a joint air defense system with Armenia. Bordyuzha portrayed this as advancing Russia's security interests in the region in which unified rules will be developed for exchanging air defense information, and as a step towards the future goal of achieving a common air defense system covering Belarus, Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

In an interview with Ekho Moskvyy radio on February 13, Russia's ambassador to NATO, Dmitriy Rogozin, expanded on Moscow's plans for extending air defense capabilities beyond its borders offering protection from an "aggressor" or in cases of aircraft hijacked by terrorists. He suggested individual state air defenses were inadequate, and if a state is under threat of air attack it is best to intercept targets some distance from its own borders. Rogozin seemed to consider the issue in terms protecting Russian airspace.

Armenia and Kazakhstan as Russia's air defense partners

Developing these systems in Armenia, Belarus and Kazakhstan enables Moscow to receive information relating to the air space within their three respective strategic regions, while providing a need for the training of personnel from these countries within Russia in the use of integrated systems, communications and information systems, command and control and carrying out strikes.

It also serves as a deterrent to those states that may contemplate using military force and reasserts Russia's position as regional security guarantor. Reservations about air defense initiatives and the new CSTO rapid reaction forces have already been expressed in Baku.

Kazakhstan has Russian S-300 air defense systems protecting Astana and Almaty. Nevertheless, Akhmetov confirmed on February 12 that the Kazakhstani Ministry of Defense expects additional S-300 systems soon. Astana has also been trying to procure S-400 systems from Russia.

Akhmetov told foreign defense attaches accredited in Astana that that the country will receive "a significant number of the S-300 units", though he was less clear about what is necessitating the sudden emphasis on air defense. He said air defense systems would make it possible "to significantly reinforce Kazakhstan's air defense system, as well as to step up the country's integration into the CSTO". In this sense he sees their value as more political than military, signaling Astana's determination to prioritize the CSTO.

Indeed, the political-military justification only makes sense when questions are raised about the threat Kazakhstan is protecting itself from, and what it considers most vulnerable: the answer lies in its drive to adequately protect its energy infrastructure from potential attack from the air. This is crucial, since NATO has been exploring offering energy security capabilities to Kazakhstan: Russia has now effectively closed this door, with Astana's approval.

Akhmetov has talked up Kazakhstan's military cooperation with NATO and its members, as well as maintaining close defense relations with Russia both bilaterally and through the CSTO. Recently he has become more confident about Kazakhstan's defense ties with Russia, which are set to deepen further.

In 2009 both countries will hold large-scale joint military exercises. Commenting on the CSTO, Akhmetov said it was "above all about Russia", as they plan to hold different types of military exercises in terms of the quantity and quality of troops and equipment involved.

"Virtual cooperation" gives way to "virtual cold war"

While conducting vigorous international diplomacy to boost Moscow's cooperative posture with the West, Russia is actively pursuing policies which either thwart NATO objectives or policies, or alternatively make future engagement in these regions more difficult without Moscow's consent.

In this sense, Russia is currently engaging in a "virtual cold war", one that is not as costly as a real cold war, allowing it to minimize Western influence in regions regarded as a "sphere of influence" while allowing the presentation of the "user friendly" and potentially cooperative stance with the West.