

OPFOR, BLUFOR: A Comparative Analysis of NATO and the CSTO

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Introduction

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and turbulence of the 1990s, the Russian Federation has reemerged as a regional power in the greater Eurasian region. Through its participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union, Moscow has emulated the West's usage of treaty organizations and regional bodies as a means of power-projection. Among the many regional bodies encompassing the former Soviet Union, few are as relevant to Russian defense policy and Eurasian security as the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization). Like the Warsaw Pact before it, the CSTO functions as the security pillar of Moscow's political reconstruction of Greater Eurasia. This paper will analyze the general function of the CSTO, compare the equipment and doctrine used by NATO and the CSTO, and contrast the CSTO's Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF) to NATO's Response Force (NRF), the Spearhead.

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The Structure of the CSTO

The CSTO is currently composed of six member states (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and the Russian Federation) and two observers (Afghanistan and Serbia). The organization was formed in 1992 and, similar to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), is composed entirely of former Soviet republics. Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan have all formally left the alliance while Turkmenistan has completely abstained from membership. Although Ukraine never pursued membership in the CSTO, Russia did maintain a naval facility at Sevastopol prior to the annexation of Crimea. All six members of the alliance compose the CIS Joint Air Defense System—a separate regional network of radar systems, anti-air installations, and airports designed to secure airspace throughout the former Soviet Union. Beyond its absolute advantage in population, geographic size, and military might, Russia effectively maintains veto power over the establishment of new military bases in other CSTO members by third parties (Sodiqov, 2012).

Member Obligations within the CSTO

One of the easiest ways to understand the function of the CSTO is to compare it to its western counterpart, NATO. When analyzing the founding treaties of the CSTO and NATO, there is a visible disparity in what sort of actions each alliance expects of their members. NATO places a large emphasis on obligatory action and unquestionable commitment towards the defense of the alliance. In comparison, the CSTO stresses the voluntary nature of collective defense and the supremacy of national sovereignty over collective action. An effective way to understand this divide is to compare key articles within the founding charters of both alliances.

Article 5 (NATO)

The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.

Any such armed attack and all measures taken as a result thereof shall immediately be reported to the Security Council. Such measures shall be terminated when the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to restore and maintain international peace and security.

(NATO, 1949)

NATO's Article 5 clearly states how members of the alliance must respond to an attack against one member, the legal action considered invoked (in this case, Article 51 of the United Nations charter), and the actions that may be taken to secure peace, "...including the use of armed force." This article even includes reference to the Security Council and what actions would result

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in the resolution of Article 5, “...such measures shall be terminated when the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to restore and maintain international peace and security.”

Compared to NATO’s founding treaty, the CSTO lists significantly fewer obligations of its members in regards to collective defense and crisis response. This is most evident in articles three and five of the document, the closest thing to an “action clause” in the treaty:

Article 3:

The goals of the Organization shall be strengthening of peace, international and regional security and stability, protection of independence on a collective basis, territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Member States, in achievement of which the Member States prefer political means.

Article 5:

The Organization shall operate on the basis of strict respect of independence, voluntariness of participation, equal rights and duties of the Member States, non-interference into the affairs falling within the national jurisdiction of the Member States.

(CSTO, 1992)

Article 3 of the CSTO treaty states the alliance’s preference towards political resolution, while Article 5 reinforces the strictly voluntary nature of the alliance and the relationship between its members. Compared to the details listed in NATO’s Article 5, the CSTO leaves the conditions required for collective action and the means of conflict resolution open to interpretation. Even the Warsaw Pact, the Soviet-led predecessor to the CSTO, expected a higher degree of action in response to a security threat:

Article 4:

In the event of armed attack in Europe on one or more of the Parties to the Treaty by any state or group of states, each of the Parties to the Treaty, in the exercise of its right to individual or collective self-defence in accordance with Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations Organization, shall immediately, either individually or in agreement with other Parties to the Treaty, come to the assistance of the state or states attacked with all such means as it deems necessary, including armed force. The Parties to the Treaty shall immediately consult concerning the necessary measures to be taken by them jointly in order to restore and maintain international peace and security. Measures taken on the basis of this Article shall be reported to the Security Council in conformity with the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations Organization. These measures shall be discontinued immediately the Security Council adopts the necessary measures to restore and maintain international peace and security (Warsaw Pact, 1955).

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The inclusion of the phrase “...either individually or in agreement with other Parties to the Treaty, come to the assistance of the state or states attacked with all such means as it deems necessary, including armed force,” implies a significantly larger degree of member autonomy in the Warsaw Pact compared to the CSTO. The CSTO’s hesitancy to include stronger terminology may be a reflection of the Warsaw Pact’s history, as the only joint action taken by the organization was the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, another member of the alliance (Global Security, 2011). The disparity between NATO and CSTO member expectations may be an indication of the greater difference in defense doctrine and what “collective action” would be taken by either treaty organization.

A Comparison of Equipment and Projection Capabilities

Infantry and Armor:

The standard infantry weapon among CSTO members is the AK-74, a rifle developed in the early 1970s which saw heavy usage throughout the Eastern Bloc and elsewhere in the world as a major export armament. Infantry are typically supported by BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles and BTR-80 armored personnel carriers, two vehicles whose designs date back to the mid 1980s. The T-72 tank remains the cornerstone of the CSTO’s armored formations and has seen prolonged service life due to a wide variety of retrofits and updates. Recently, the Russian Federation unveiled the T-14 Armata, a next-generation main battle tank designed as part of a wider modernization effort in the Russian military. While members of the CSTO are allowed to purchase weapons from the Russian Federation at the same price as the Russian military (Weitz, 2014), the militaries of the CSTO remain dependent on Soviet-era weaponry.

NATO utilizes a heterogeneous collection of weapons and military hardware. It is not uncommon for NATO members to employ a combination of domestically produced arms and equipment imported from other members of the alliance. This diverse mix of weaponry is bound together by decades of standardization practices designed to ensure cross-compatibility. For example, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States use different assault rifles in their respective militaries, but through NATO standardization, each rifle fires the same caliber round and utilizes the same type of magazine (Arvidsson, 2008). A lesser degree of standardification is seen among former Warsaw Pact members in NATO. While countries like Poland and Bulgaria still depend on Soviet-designed weaponry, a variety of modernization programs has ensured a degree of cross-compatibility with NATO-standard hardware (STRATFOR, 2012).

The continued usage of Soviet weaponry and universal dependence on Russian arms imports within the CSTO has effectively created a monoculture of military equipment. This provides the CSTO a slight advantage, as members of the alliance may enjoy near-perfect hardware compatibility between one another. This greatly reduces the logistical burden of field operations, as CSTO members would not be concerned with compatibility between competing standards of military equipment.

Naval Capabilities

The Russian Navy represents the CSTO's main means of naval projection. The Russian Navy maintains a presence in the Baltic Sea, Black Sea, Pacific Ocean, and the Arctic Ocean. Russia's naval capabilities in the far north are greatly enhanced by the usage of nuclear powered icebreakers—craft capable of exerting more force than their diesel-powered counterparts and breaking through thicker ice (Zerkalov, 2016). The Russian Navy also contains the aircraft cruiser *Admiral Kuznetsov*. The *Admiral Kuznetsov*'s designation as an “aircraft cruiser” is a reflection of its heavy armament and formal classification as a “heavy aircraft-carrying missile cruiser” by the Russian Navy (“тяжелый авианесущий крейсер” - ТАВКР). The *Admiral Kuznetsov*'s multirole capability comes at the cost of a reduced aircraft capacity compared to other aircraft carriers. In 2016 the *Admiral Kuznetsov* was deployed in the Mediterranean Sea as part of a naval operation in support of the Syrian government (RIA Novosti, 2016). Kazakhstan currently maintains a 14-vessel patrol fleet in the Caspian Sea. While this fleet is mostly preoccupied with enforcing Kazakhstan's claims to the Caspian Sea, the fleet's isolation from international waters has greatly diminished its strategic utility.

The Russian and Kazakh navies are dwarfed by the combined naval forces of NATO. The United States possesses 11 aircraft carriers, with six currently deployed. When combined with the three fixed-wing aircraft carriers utilized by other NATO members (the *Charles de Gaulle*, *Cavour*, and newly commissioned *Queen Elizabeth*), the number of aircraft carriers operated by NATO forces grows to nine. This number does not include amphibious assault ships, helicopter carriers, and other ships capable of launching vertical take-off and landing (VTOL) aircraft. There is also a visible difference in the amount of aircraft, crew, and other auxiliary forces fielded by both navies. The Russian Navy is staffed by 148,000 personnel and is supported by 359 aircraft (Defense Intelligence Agency, 2017). In comparison, the US Navy alone is crewed by 322,421 personnel (not including reserves) and maintains a complement of at least 3,700 aircraft (U.S. Navy, 2017).

Aircraft and Air Defense

Compared to the extensive network of air bases and aircraft carriers spanning from the Pacific coast of Canada and the United States to Eastern Europe, the air forces of the CSTO are limited to operations within the former Soviet Union. While the Russian air force has demonstrated a continued presence in strategic theaters like the Baltic Sea and Scandinavia, other members of the CSTO struggle to match Russia's aerial projection capabilities. The air forces of smaller CSTO members such as Tajikistan typically operate a limited fleet of aging Soviet-designed craft or, in Armenia's case, function primarily as support infrastructure for Russian air divisions stationed in their territory (Mkrtchyan, 2016). The disparity of aerial capabilities within the CSTO, combined with the size of the alliance's airspace (an area covering roughly 13 percent of the Earth's landmass), has led to a greater emphasis on air-defense in place of aerial superiority.

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The S-300 and S-400 surface-to-air missile systems arguably provides the largest strategic utility among members of the alliance. The S-300 was developed in 1975 and served as the primary means of sophisticated air-defense for the Eastern Bloc as a whole. Depending on the particular variant and method of launch, the S-300 missile is capable of intercepting targets within a range of 40-250 kilometers (Aerospace Daily, 2015). While primarily attached to infantry regiments or deployed in fixed positions, the S-300 has been adapted for compatibility with certain naval craft (the most notable being the *Admiral Kuznetsov*). Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and the Russian all utilize the S-300.

The S-400 was developed in the early 1990s and represents a modernized version of the S-300 system. Unlike its predecessor, the S-400 is capable of intercepting cruise missiles and other forms of ballistic artillery (Gady, 2017). Certain configurations of the S-400 may reach a range of roughly 400 km (Dr. Kopp, 2014). It is likely that the development of such capabilities was influenced by NATO's proposed "Missile Shield" over Eastern Europe. The deployment of S-300 and S-400 anti-air systems throughout the CSTO would be an effective counterweight against NATO's aerial superiority and would force an opponent to engage the alliance through ground-based conventional methods.

The Collective Rapid Reaction Force

The CSTO's Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF) is a multinational military brigade created in 2009, designed to provide an immediate response to a threat against a CSTO member. The two largest contributors to the CRRF are the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan—both of which contribute paratrooper units in the CRRF (Denisenko, 2009). Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, and Tajikistan have also contributed their own infantry elements to the formation. While no longer a member of the CSTO, Uzbekistan pledged to commit resources to CSTO missions and the CRRF on an "ad-hoc basis" during Tashkent's second membership period (Tolipov, 2013).

As stated by the alliance's leadership, the primary targets of the CRRF are non-state actors such as terror cells or trafficking networks (CSTO, 1991). Given the focus on these two groups, it is likely that the CRRF's theaters of operation would be Central Asia and the Caucasus. Both regions face their own challenges related to terrorism while Central Asia's notoriously porous borders have made the region a gateway for narcotics and weapons trafficking into the former Soviet Union. Although not officially a CRRF mission, military exercises between Russia and other members of the CSTO (e.g. Zapad 2017) offer a hint of the organization's capabilities in interstate conflict. Following Russian military doctrine after the annexation of Crimea, Zapad (2017) placed heavy emphasis on the usage of "hybrid war" elements and focused on mobility and asymmetric elements of conflict rather than rehabilitating older unwieldy Soviet strategies (Schmitt, 2017).

There are many scenarios that would lead to an external deployment of the CSTO Rapid Reaction Force. One possible situation would be deployment to a frozen conflict zone such as South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh or the Luhansk People's Republic/Donetsk

People's Republic as part of a peacekeeping operation. None of these territories are recognized as independent states by the international community. However, these frozen conflict zones receive extensive material, political, and military support from members of the CSTO. An example of this relationship would be Russia's engagement with South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Moscow remains one of the largest advocates for the international recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence from Georgia. Beyond political support, Moscow maintains a military presence in both territories and has ensured varying degrees of economic integration between both territories and the Russian Federation (Gerrits, 2016). It is possible that the CRRF may be mobilized and deployed to one of these frozen conflict territories in response to a geopolitical crisis, particularly if escalation of the crisis would pose a direct threat to a member of the CSTO. It is likely that this sort of action would emulate Russia's role in the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, for Russia's actions were largely focused on supporting already existing South Ossetian and Abkhazian militias in opposition to the Georgian military (Nichol, 2009).

Another hypothetical scenario that would lead to the external deployment of the CRRF would be the establishment of a peacekeeping mission to Syria as part of a larger regional stabilization effort. While rumors of impending CSTO deployment to Syria were quickly dispelled by the governments of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Kucera, 2017), operations conducted by Russia (such as the de-mining of Palmyra and deployment of the *Admiral Kuznetsov* in the Mediterranean Sea in support of the Assad regime) provide an insight into what sort of action would be taken by the CSTO in relation to the Syrian Civil War.

The CSTO Rapid Reaction Force and NATO's Spearhead

The NATO Response Force (NRF) is a multipurpose military formation created in 2002. The purpose of the NRF is to provide an immediate response to any crisis facing the alliance, including non-military threats such as natural disasters or political instability. NRF deployments include disaster-relief following Hurricane Katrina and security operations during the Athens Olympic games and 2004 Afghan presidential elections (European Parliament, 2014). In 2014, NATO members approved the creation of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), often referred to as the "Spearhead Force." While the Spearhead Force shares a similar multipurpose role as the NRF, the VJTF features a greater amount of troops designated for rapid-response actions and a larger emphasis on combat operations. The Spearhead Force is primarily designed for crisis management and rapid response and may also act as a vanguard for a larger NATO-led intervention mission. The Spearhead Force is composed of 5,000 troops and is designed for deployment within "three to five days" of a crisis (NATO, 2015). This Spearhead Force is supported by NATO's Standing Naval Maritime Groups and may be accompanied by other aerial and naval assets. The formation almost exclusively uses temporary deployment in place of permanent stationing and is primarily focused on the eastern members of the alliance such as Poland, Romania, and the Baltic States. The creation of the Spearhead Force was partially in response to political developments in Eastern Europe in early 2014, as Russia's

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intervention in Crimea and eastern Ukraine following Euromaidan has led to a renewed interest among NATO members in addressing the challenges posed by state-actors.

Although the Collective Rapid Reaction and Spearhead forces share a similar emphasis on rapid response and crisis management, there are many elements that separate both formations. NATO's Spearhead is focused on a system of continuous rotating deployment, while the Rapid Reaction force is based on static deployment to fixed military installations throughout the CSTO. While the Spearhead utilizes elements of naval support to enhance mobility and projection capabilities, the Rapid Reaction Force is heavily dependent on airborne infantry and paratrooper elements due to the land-locked nature of much of the CSTO.

There is also a disparity between the size and structure of both forces. Compared to the Spreadhead force's function as a small, highly mobile contingent, the CSTO's designation of multiple brigades and divisions as part of the Collective Rapid Reaction Force seems to imply a greater emphasis on macroscopic regional security rather than precision crisis response. This may be a result of the CSTO's significantly larger geographic area. Just as the Collective Rapid Reaction and Spearhead forces differ in their geographic deployment, the CRRF is composed of a static group of designated divisions while the Spearhead is composed of a rotating brigades that have been designated to the mission.

Although the Collective Rapid Reaction Force has never been formally deployed, a component of the CRRF participated in the annexation of Crimea and subsequent war in eastern Ukraine. The 31st Guards Air Assault Brigade, one of the two Russian units designated as part of the Collective Rapid Reaction Force in 2009 - was dispatched to the Crimean peninsula without insignia as part of the irregular forces often referred to as "Little Green Men" (Sutyagin, 2015). Following the occupation of Crimea, the 31st Guards Air Assault Brigade participated in the Battle of Ilovaisk, a major engagement between Russian-backed separatists and the Ukrainian military in August 2014. The involvement of a major CRRF component in the annexation and subsequent invasion of another state contrasts sharply with the Spearhead's emphasis on ally assistance and crisis response. Considering the importance of the 31st Guards Air Assault Brigade to the functionality of the CRRF, it is entirely possible that the Collective Rapid Reaction Force may be used to subdue a CSTO member that strays from Moscow's influence.

Conclusion

Similar to many of the Russia's geopolitical projects, it is possible that the CSTO's utility is not derived from the alliance's ability to provide security assurances to its members, but rather the greater political implications that come with CSTO membership. After the expansion of NATO and the European Union, the Russian Federation has found its influence gradually receding in the former Soviet Union. The CSTO presents the Russian Federation an opportunity to translate its soft power and influence into a new political demarcation of the former Soviet Union.

Yet the loss of three CSTO members over the past 25 years hints at an even larger geopolitical crisis—the Russian Federation has found itself increasingly at odds with traditional

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allies like Ukraine and Georgia while losing relevance to parts of Central Asia. The continued usage of strong-arm tactics and military intervention in response to unfavorable political developments has led to the erosion of Russian political capital and influence in the former Soviet Union. Failure to present the tangible strategic benefits of alignment with Moscow and the CSTO will guarantee the further loss of allies in the region and increased isolation for Russia.

Yet despite Russia's challenging geopolitical situation, the creation of the Collective Rapid Reaction Force by the CSTO represents one of the more concrete security initiatives taken by the alliance. Although the CRRF struggles to match the mobility and projection capabilities of NATO's Spearhead, the force is clearly capable of ensuring an effective response to a wide variety of geopolitical challenges - whether it is a crisis in the Caucasus and Central Asia or the sudden thawing of a frozen conflict.

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