

## SECURITY AND INTEGRATION IN CENTRAL ASIA: THE CSTO AND SCO

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### ABSTRACT

**T**he author analyzes the problems of Central Asian security and the role the CSTO and SCO play in ensuring it; he looks at the past, outlines the stages of building an efficient regional security system designed to oppose contemporary challenges, and concludes that regional in-

tegration as the only effective answer to the threats and challenges should be continued lest the region remains forever in an insecurity zone and falls behind the international community, which will deprive Central Asia of its chance for political and economic success.

**KEYWORDS:** *Central Asia, security, regional integration, CSTO, SCO, the Taliban, Afghanistan.*

### *Introduction*

Security, a subject of lively discussion, remains the most important and the most challenging task at all levels—national, regional, and international.

Today, old security challenges have been revived, while new ones are cropping up because the global security system no longer works: it has lost its previous balance of power, while reality makes many of the international security agreements inadequate.

Our experience has taught us that an efficient regional security structure is very important for regional integration.

In Central Asia, the recent events caused by globalization and the ensuing economic, social, political, and geopolitical shifts have focused attention on regional stability and security: the region should be ready with a substantial collective response to the current and future threats and challenges.

Its geostrategic location at the meeting point of China, Russia, and South Asia, as well as its natural and human resources are hard to overestimate, which attracts numerous and varied forces to the region.

The majority of the Central Asian countries are involved in alliances in various spheres, including those set up for economic and military-political cooperation. The most active among them are the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

This means that their role in ensuring regional security and promoting regional cooperation deserves particular discussion.

## Security Threats in Central Asia

Today, the existing and potential security threats created both inside and outside the region have come to the fore in the region's security agenda.

The external sources are the following:

- The three evils: international terror, religious extremism, and national separatism;
- Existing and potential seats of instability next to the region's borders: Afghanistan, Iraq, the conflict between India and Pakistan, and the Caspian problem;
- Globalization as a factor causing some of the region's countries to lag behind;
- The main geopolitical players and the way they are playing the revived Big Game and looking at the New Silk Road megaproject;
- Illicit trafficking of drugs and weapons;
- Foreign military bases in the region;
- Hectic activities of international actors (Great Powers)—the U.S., Russia and China;
- Contradictions in the Muslim world, in particular, exacerbated contradictions among various trends in Islam: Wahhabism, Salafism, Hanafi Sunnism (traditional in Central Asia), etc.
- Radical Islamists (al-Qa'eda, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Movement for Independence of Eastern Turkestan, and others) who have moved closer to the borders between the region and Afghanistan and become much more active;
- The Taliban, which might revive as soon as the counterterrorist coalition pulls out.

There are internal reasons as well:

- Contradictions within ethnicities and between them;
- Political instability;
- The persisting social and economic crisis;
- Territorial and border disagreements;
- Transborder organized crime;
- Illegal migration;
- The structures of energy sources and water use which differ from country to country;
- Non-traditional environmental threats created by nuclear production and nuclear tests; climate change, degradation of the environment, etc.

## Afghanistan as a Security Challenge

Today, Afghanistan and the Taliban entrenched in its territory represent the gravest threat to the Central Asian countries and their security.

In the last ten years, the Afghan authorities and world community (the United States and its NATO allies) have created all the necessary prerequisites for conflict settlement and restored statehood. The country has established constructive cooperation with regional countries and is involved in important regional and international structures. It has acquired a Constitution and experience in holding parliamentary and presidential elections; it has its own defense and security structures now in control of several provinces. The situation, however, remains tense.

There are numerous threats and challenges to stability; in view of the planned pullout of the international forces, they are causing even greater concern. The people at the helm in Afghanistan and their international partners have so far failed to ensure security and sustainable economic development. The Taliban, al-Qa'eda, and other radical groups remain one of the gravest threats to the country's leaders and its population in the center and in some of the regions.

NATO has not been and still is not efficient enough (this is especially true of its anti-drug efforts); there is a lot of discontent among the local people because of the fairly frequent unpleasant accidents and because of the foreign military presence in the country in general. So far, left to their own devices, the Afghan law and order structures cannot cope with the numerous terrorist and extremist outcrops in society, which undermine the process of national reconciliation underway in the country.

Recently, terrorist groups have started moving up to the relatively stable north, which cannot but cause concern. Their activities in the region threaten the country's stability; they also might spread terrorism and extremism across the border to neighboring countries.

This means that the planned withdrawal of the coalition forces scheduled for 2014 may increase tension inside the country and negatively affect the entire region.

At the same time, domestic, regional, and international factors and the causes and various aspects of the development of the military-political and strategic situation in Afghanistan suggest certain possible post-2014 dynamics.

- (1) Due to domestic and foreign factors the military-strategic and political situation in Afghanistan will remain complicated. The pullout of the main coalition forces, presidential and provincial elections scheduled for 2014, as well as certain other important political events will add vehemence to the political struggle and worsen the military-political situation in the country.

It should be said that Karzai's protégé approved by the Americans stands a good chance of becoming the country's next president.

It seems that the opposition is prepared to nominate Abdullah Abdullah again as the most neutral of all other possibilities. An outstanding state and public figure, he has done a lot to stabilize the country; he is popular inside and outside Afghanistan and comes from a mixed family: his father is a Pashtoon, while his mother is a Tajik.

Atta Mohammad Nur, the highly popular governor of the Balkh Province, is another possible presidential candidate.

- (2) The Taliban might recapture power after the pullout; at least it will make an attempt to regain its lost position through peaceful and allegedly fair elections or through the use of force (the Taliban did this in 1995-1996). Irrespective of the possible options, we should be ready to face a pre-counterterrorist situation.
- (3) The 2014 pullout might trigger political chaos in which the borders (the northern borders, the least protected today, in particular) will become porous. The political and military-strategic collapse in Afghanistan is fraught with a breakthrough of international terrorist groups into Central Asia.

It cannot be excluded that Taliban fighters will raid the neighboring states in large groups and that they will become even more active after 2014.

It should be said that inside Afghanistan people are worried over possible negative developments after the coalition pullout; they do not like what is going on in the country either.

The Northern Alliance is especially concerned: made up of Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Hazaras, and other peoples, it was and remains the most persistent enemy of the Taliban.

The former mujaheds cannot accept Taliban politics; it comes as no surprise that one of the leaders suggested they set up a council of mujaheds and arm them so that they would be able to protect their families.

The ordinary people stand at a turning point: they have to decide what to do next and with whom.

Today, the coalition forces are pushing large groups of Taliban members closer to the CIS borders; according to eyewitnesses the Taliban forces, carrying the latest weapons, have already appeared in a larger part of Afghan Badakhshan (about 60 to 65%).

## Is an Efficient Collective Security System Possible in Central Asia?

The fairly disquieting situation across the Afghan border is an objective challenge to stability and security in Central Asia. This means that the region needs an effective collective security system to bring the Central Asian countries together, make it easier to address common stability problems, and widen and strengthen their cooperation in view of the national interests of each of them.

There are objective factors which make this absolute necessity a far from simple task.

- First, Russia, which regards the region as a traditional zone of its national interests, remains the dominant power in Central Asia. In the last decade, its former impact on the region has diminished for several reasons, but the Central Asian expert community believes that Moscow will rebuild what it has lost. The fact that Vladimir Putin was re-elected president of Russia with a tale-telling election program is convincing proof of this.

It should be said that the Central Asian countries have changed their previous approaches to their foreign policy partners. They concentrate on national political and economic interests; the region has been drawn into the orbit of the interests of China, the United States, India, Iran, Turkey, and the Arab countries, which are implementing all sorts of humanitarian and economic programs there. This means that the local countries can choose their partners.

- Second, the regional security system is inevitably developing in the fairly narrow limits created by the rivalry among the main players present in the region.
- Third, the local countries cannot agree on the basic principles of a common security system in the region because of their different ideas about the ongoing economic, political, and military reforms; the national economies are loosely interconnected, while the export structures are practically identical. Different countries have different assessments of the national security threats; they have different ideas about their foreign policy priorities and the centers of power toward which they want to orientate. Integration is further complicated by their struggle for regional leadership, personal ambitions of the heads of state, the still unresolved territorial and border disagreements and the legalization of state borders.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See: R. Burnashev, "On the Possibility of Having a Regional Security System in Central Asia (*Methodological Issues*)," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 1 (7), 2001.

The above has largely determined the nature and stages of the emergence of the regional security system in Central Asia.

## **Security as the Driving Force behind Regional Integration: The CSTO and SCO**

Regional cooperation in the security sphere is not smooth despite common external threats and challenges, with which no country, no matter how strong, can cope on its own.

Deeper integration is the only answer, as well as an efficient method for coping with the security problems.

It should be said that several structures (sub-regional and international-regional) have been set up within a historically fairly short period of time (the years of independence) with active involvement of the Central Asian countries. They may serve reliable pillars of regional security and stability.

The CSTO and SCO, the main subject of this article, are two of these pillars. My interest in these structures and their role in ensuring regional security through multilateral cooperation is easily explained by the fact that Russia (a member of the CSTO and SCO) and China (the SCO), two main international actors and two closest neighbors of the Central Asian countries, are involved in these organizations. Today, integration of the regional countries and Russia's participation in the process is the only option that can consolidate the region's security and fortify, among other things, the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

The Collective Security Treaty Organization is an international regional structure set up by the sides of the Collective Security Treaty of 15 May, 1992, to adapt the treaty to the latest geopolitical reality and make use of collective defense forces and weapons more practicable. Early in the 1990s, the CSTO was the only collective structure set up to ensure regional security.

Its Charter, adopted by the Collective Security Council on 7 October, 2002, came into force on 18 September, 2003. The following countries belong to the CSTO: the Republic of Armenia, the Republic of Belarus, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the RF, and the Republic of Tajikistan. The Republic of Uzbekistan suspended its membership in 2012.

Today, the CSTO is functioning on the basis of its Charter (registered at the U.N.) and the following documents:

- The Agreement on the Legal Status of the CSTO signed on 7 October, 2002 (came into force on 18 September, 2003);
- The Agreement on the Status of Units of Forces and Weapons of the Collective Security System of 11 October, 2000;
- The Agreement on Basic Principles of Military and Technical Cooperation of 20 June, 2000;
- The Agreement on Operational Equipment of Territory and Joint Use of Military Infrastructure Facilities of the CSTO Member States (Astana, 18 June, 2004);
- The Agreement on CSTO Military Training for the CSTO Member States (Moscow, 23 June, 2005);
- The Agreement on the Procedure for the Operational Deployment, Utilization, and Comprehensive Support of the Central Asian Collective Security Region Collective Rapid-Deployment Forces (Minsk, 23 June, 2006);

- The Agreement on CSTO Peacemaking Activity (Dushanbe, 6 October, 2007);
- The Agreement on the CSTO Collective Rapid Response Forces (Moscow, 14 June, 2009);
- The Agreement on the Status of Units of Forces and Weapons of the CSTO Collective Security System (Moscow, 10 December, 2010);
- The Agreements on Cooperation of the CSTO Member States in Design, Production, Exploitation, Maintenance, Modernization and Extension of Exploitation and Disposal of Military Equipment (Moscow, 10 December, 2010);
- The Agreement on the General Principles of Setting Up Interstate Scientific-Production Units within the CSTO for Military Production (Moscow, 10 December, 2010);
- The Protocol on the Location of Military Installations in the CSTO Member States (Moscow, 20 December, 2011).

The Collective Security Treaty Organization is an open military-political defense organization; its Charter identifies its aims as strengthening peace and international and regional security and stability, as well as collective protection of independence, territorial integrity, and sovereignty of the member states mainly by political means.

The member states coordinate their positions on international and regional security problems primarily through consultations and pool their efforts in the struggle against international terrorism, illicit trafficking of drugs and weapons, organized transnational crime, illegal migration, and other threats.

In May 2001, the Organization acquired the Collective Rapid Deployment Forces (one battalion each from Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), the first ever experience of multisided forces in the Central Asian region. In 2002, an air contingent of the Rapid Deployment Forces was deployed in Kyrgyzstan at the Kant airbase. In the future, other CSTO members might add their units.

On 4 February, 2009, the Moscow CSTO Summit approved the decision to set up the Collective Rapid Response Forces. Under the Agreement, they will be used to rebuff military aggression and carry out special anti-terrorist and anti-extremist operations; they will also fight organized crime and drug trafficking and liquidate the negative effects of emergency situations.

The decisions of the heads of CSTO member states on more active anti-drug efforts have added a fresh impulse to anti-drug cooperation. A Coordinating Council of the Heads of the CSTO member states' Competent Structures to Combat Illicit Drug Trafficking in the post-Soviet space has been an efficient response to transnational drug crime. Since 2003, the Council, acting jointly with the CSTO Secretariat, has carried out several complex interstate highly successful preventive operations called "Channel" to combat illicit traffic in Afghan narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances along the so-called Northern Route.<sup>2</sup>

The CSTO is actively establishing cooperation with the SC U.N. Counter-Terrorism Committee, the OSCE, and the SCO and is engaged in a dialog with NATO.

An analysis of what has been done and what should be done indicates that the CSTO should work toward closer military and political integration of its members; coordinate efforts to enhance their potential; and improve and strengthen the organization's military component. Much is being done to strengthen military-political cooperation; improve cooperation among regional coalition

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<sup>2</sup> See: B.F. Odinaeva, "Osobennosti narkosituatsii v Tsentralnoy Azii i sotrudnichestvo Tadjikistana v borbe s nezakonnym oborotom narkotikov," in: *Materialy mezhdunarodnoy nauchnoy konferentsii "Rossia i Tsentralnaia Azia v usloviakh geopoliticheskoy transformatsii: vneshnepoliticheskoe izmerenie,"* Dushanbe, 2010, pp. 31-33.

forces and assets, which are the key links of the collective security system; and carry out joint training of the military specialists on a multisided basis.

On the whole, it can be said that the CSTO has brought its members to a qualitatively new stage of cooperation marked by deeper and multisided processes leading to a collective security system.

The legal framework suggests that the region has acquired a full-scale structure that ensures national and regional security; its political mechanisms are functioning smoothly to allow the members to further coordinate their foreign policy steps and develop military-political integration to strengthen their defense potential.

The expert community cannot agree on its assessments of the CSTO's performance. Some of them believe that cooperation among the Central Asian countries under the CSTO aegis is unlikely to produce a regional collective security system. They proceed from the fact that Uzbekistan suspended its membership in the Organization open to new members, while Turkmenistan prefers to keep away from it. These experts point to Russia's domination in the CSTO (Russia is, indeed, the key military and financial sponsor of the rapid response forces) and to the fact that many decisions and documents drafted within the CSTO remain on paper mainly because of the very different financial possibilities of the member states and combat-readiness of their armed forces.

Other experts point to the Organization's potential, which means that an efficient collective security system is being built in the region. Those who say this point to the common approaches of the member states and their very similar ideas about a fairly wide range of regional and global problems which form the CSTO political foundation, as well as their shared concerns about the new security threats, both global and regional.

It seems that the SCO, based on the Shanghai Five, can serve as another efficient regional security instrument.

The Shanghai Five was a multisided mechanism used to resolve border issues and strengthen security along the former Soviet-Chinese border. The first meeting of the leaders of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan took place in April 1996 in Shanghai where they signed the Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions; a year later, in Moscow, the leaders of the Five signed the Treaty on Reduction of Military Forces in Border Regions.

Successful implementation of these agreements and a certain amount of progress in settling border issues confirmed that collective cooperation in this format was very much needed; this encouraged further cooperation. The Dushanbe Summit, which took place in July 2000, was the first step toward the new status of a regional structure of multisided cooperation on a much wider scale. It pointed to the task of opposing non-traditional security threats, a product of the changed geopolitical situation in the region, as one of the priorities.

The decisions of the Dushanbe Summit were executed in corresponding multisided documents designed to invigorate cooperation among its members. These efforts culminated in the Declaration of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization signed on 15 June, 2001 by the leaders of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan; Mongolia, Pakistan, Iran, India, and Afghanistan are observers, while Belarus and Sri Lanka are dialogue partners.

In fact, large states with observer status have increased the SCO's potential for multisided and mutually advantageous cooperation in many fields.

Today the SCO is steadily moving toward multisided cooperation among its member states in a wide range of fields, security issues being a priority.

Since 2004, permanent structures—the Secretariat in Beijing and the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent—have been functioning on a permanent basis and ensuring the Organization's smooth functioning.

The Council of Foreign Ministers has acquired a mechanism of multisided consultations on urgent international issues; much is being done to widen the Organization's international contacts. In

2004, it became an observer in the U.N. GA; memorandums of understanding were signed with ACEAN and CIS; in 2009, the U.N. passed a resolution on cooperation between the U.N. and the SCO.

This means that the Organization is gaining international prestige.

The July 2005 Summit convened in Astana passed a Concept of Cooperation among the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Combating Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism; the Final Declaration said, in part, that the Concept was conducive to RATS “becoming an effective collective instrument” with much clearer aims and much more purposeful activities.

On 21 April, 2006, the SCO made public its plans to fight international narcomafia as the source of terrorism funding the world over.

In June 2012, the heads of the member states passed a Declaration on building a region of lasting peace and common prosperity by consolidating bilateral and multilateral cooperation and jointly combating terrorism, separatism, and extremism, illicit trafficking of drugs and weapons, other types of transborder crime, illegal migration, and new challenges and security threats.

The achievements are obvious: RATS has already prevented hundreds of terrorist acts in the territories of the SCO members; special services of the member states have detained and liquidated dozens of terrorist group leaders.

From the very first days of the SCO, especially in 2011 and 2012, the member states have been paying particular attention to anti-terrorist training exercises: the joint Tien Shan-2/2011 anti-terrorist training of special services and law enforcers of the SCO member states in China, the joint anti-terrorist training exercises involving the SCO member states’ competent structures The East-Antiterror 2012 (in Uzbekistan), and the joint anti-terrorist CPX Peaceful Mission 2012 (in Tajikistan).

The SCO member states adopted a program of multisided trade and economic cooperation, which envisages practical cooperation among ministries and departments responsible for economic activities, foreign trade, transport, environmental protection, liquidation of negative effects of extreme situations, culture, and education.

An analysis of what has been done confirms that the Organization is gradually becoming an important factor of Asian development and that its potential for combating international challenges is fairly high.

I have already written that Afghanistan has been and remains the main seat of tension in Central Asia; the coalition pullout will destabilize the country still more. This means that the SCO will be much more involved in the region’s events and will have to create a “safety belt” along the Afghan border.<sup>3</sup>

We should bear in mind that all of Afghanistan’s neighbors either belong to the SCO or are its observers; Pakistan and Iran, on which stability in the Central Asian region depends to a great extent, take into account the positions of the SCO members.

Afghanistan’s observer status allows the SCO to discuss with the Afghan leaders their common efforts because regional security is unthinkable without active involvement of Afghanistan; likewise, it will be impossible to fight the “three evils” (drugs, terrorism, and separatism), implement vitally important projects in power production, transport, and communication, and create a new type of regional cooperation.<sup>4</sup>

The SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group plays an important role in ensuring regional security; it was set up in 2005 “with the purpose of elaborating proposals and recommendations on establishing cooperation between the SCO and Afghanistan on issues of mutual interest.”

<sup>3</sup> See: S. Poya (expert at the Center for Contemporary Afghan Studies [CISA]), “Afghanskije marshrutyy na territorii SCO,” *Afghanistan.Ru*, 15 June, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> See: *Ibidem*.



The SCO has already organized several special conferences on stabilization in Afghanistan. In particular, a conference on Afghanistan under the SCO aegis held on 27 March, 2009 adopted a Declaration of the Special Conference on Afghanistan Convened under the Auspices of the SCO; a Statement by the SCO Member States and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on Combating Terrorism, Illicit Drug Trafficking, and Organized Crime; and a Plan of Action of the SCO Member States and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on Combating Terrorism, Illicit Drug Trafficking, and Organized Crime, which outlined specific measures designed to establish peace in Afghanistan.

The CSTO and SCO must pool efforts to oppose the Afghan threat; both structures will profit from this: the CSTO mechanisms will become even more efficient if supported by the SCO's international clout and prestige.

Today, their cooperation is limited to the Memorandum of Understanding between their Secretariats signed in October 2007. The document outlines such areas of cooperation as ensuring regional and international security and stability; combating terrorism; fighting drug trafficking; fighting arms trafficking; combating transnational organized crime; and other areas of mutual concern.

To cope with these and other priorities the CSTO and SCO may join forces to set up a coalition with Afghanistan and Pakistan. The role of the CSTO and SCO in the Afghan issue is gaining importance. The CSTO can localize the regional stability threats emanating from Afghanistan, while the SCO, operating in the economic sphere, may help to disentangle the "Afghan knot."<sup>5</sup>

## *Conclusion*

In recent years the CSTO and SCO have made significant progress toward building a very complicated security system adjusted to the region's specifics with the aim of creating all the necessary military-political and social-economic conditions for consistent development of the Central Asian states. It should be said that many experts describe America's military-political presence in the region as one of the elements of this system.

We think that a regional security system that includes both regional and extra-regional states best suits the current situation. This is primarily because, in addition to the regional dimensions of security, ensuring security also requires keeping in mind that the region is part of the international community.

In a world where countries and nations are interrelated, multisided cooperation is the only alternative in the sphere of security; isolation leads nowhere.

Further integration in the security sphere is extremely important for effectively opposing the threats still lingering in the region. Central Asia is facing numerous internal and external problems; the Central Asian states must find adequate answers to these problems, otherwise the region will forever remain a zone of instability.

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<sup>5</sup> N. Kozyrev, "CSTO i SCO: vozmozhnaia rol v razviiyvanii 'afghanskogo uzla'," available at [<http://aoganesyan.interaffairs.ru/read.php?item=526>], 22 December, 2010.