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CSTO Minus One: Collective Security in Central Asia After Uzbekistan's CSTO Withdrawal

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FARKHOD TOLIPOV, JUL 16 2012

On 15 May 2012 the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) summit took place in Moscow with the full participation of Uzbekistan President, Islam Karimov. Just over a month later, however, on 28 June the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan surprisingly announced that it had suspended its membership in the CSTO. This unexpected development not only once again revealed that the collective security organization lacks collectivity, but also raised a more general conceptual question about the need to revise the regional security arrangement in Central Asia.

The modality of Uzbekistan's membership in the CSTO has always been determined by the Uzbek leadership's understanding and articulation of what it calls 'national interests'. It is one of history's great paradoxes that Tashkent is the initial birthplace of the CIS collective security system: on 15 May 1992 the Collective Security Treaty was signed in Tashkent by 8 CIS states, including Uzbekistan. However, Tashkent refused to extend the Treaty in 1998 and stopped its participation to express its frustration with the failure of the CST to provide for real security against the growing threats from Afghanistan.

In May 2002 the CST was transformed into the NATO-like military block – the CSTO – with Uzbekistan still not participating. This changed in May 2005 when the Andijan tragedy of firing into protesters led the West to harshly criticize Uzbekistan for its "indiscriminate use of force" against terrorists. Tashkent responded by reducing its seemingly pro-Western foreign policy and (re)entering the CSTO in 2006. However, Uzbekistan has constantly refrained from participation in the military dimension of this proto-Alliance and has supported only non-military cooperation. This is stipulated by the Uzbek legislation which prescribes a neutral, "non-blocs" or "out-of-blocs" foreign policy.

Uzbekistan's inconsistent participation in the CSTO caused frequently irritated other members to the point that Belarus President Lukashenka even raised a question last year of expediency of furthering this membership. Finally Karimov decided not to wait and put an end to it.

Uzbekistan's decision to leave the CST/CSTO again was not caused by simple frustration. Rather more complicated geopolitical dynamics were at work. Before diving into these, however, it is worth reiterating that Uzbekistan's new distancing from the CSTO was sudden, secretive, non-transparent and probably contextual. The discreet and ambiguous explanation given by the Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs pointed out alleged disagreements between Uzbekistan and the CSTO, particularly regarding the organization's position and role with respect to a post-NATO Afghanistan. However, it seems more plausible that Uzbekistan wanted to free itself from obligations within the CSTO for more serious reasons that might have far reaching implications.

President Lukashenka did a disservice to CSTO when he made a demarche against Uzbekistan last year. Karimov responded by revealing the weakness of the Russian-led collective security system. By canceling its membership in the CSTO Uzbekistan can "kill three birds with one stone". First, Tashkent's long pursued strategy of delaying, if not halting, the post-Soviet integration revitalized that was recently by President Putin, who initiated the creation of a Euro-Asian Union, is realized. Among all integration structures in the post-Soviet space, the CSTO was often

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heralded as destined to become the most advanced and functional one. Uzbekistan's foreign policy balancing act between Moscow and Washington requires it to put its support on eclectic security arrangements based on bilateral agreements rather than on a loose yet still collective security system.

Second, Tashkent takes advantage of its newly improved relations with the U.S. and NATO, especially in the wake of the operation in Afghanistan. It is timely to recall that the U.S. and Uzbekistan are officially (codified in a 2002 agreement) strategic partners. This strategic partnership could require, among other things, Tashkent's potential assistance to Washington in the latter's possible upcoming Iranian endeavor. The CSTO would hardly support the U.S. in this respect. Moreover, it is not far-fetched to think that NATO will soon design a special Central Asian Strategy, similar to the one by the EU, and Uzbekistan, as a partner in NATO's Partnership for Peace Program, will logically be the Alliance's key partner in the region. In this regard, Uzbekistan's CSTO membership would've only served to frustrate the Uzbekistan-NATO partnership.

Third, Uzbekistan gets a chance to restore its informal status as a regional leader. The CSTO failed to ensure the fair resolution of regional problems, especially those between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Karimov might have decided to deal with this problem outside the CSTO. In this respect, the isolated and weakened Iran cannot provide strategic and political support to Tajikistan – its Persian speaking ally – which will then be more exposed to Uzbekistan's pressure.

These three factors of the post-Soviet Central Asian geopolitical reality were not present until recently, which allowed Uzbekistan to continue its membership in the CSTO. In the same vein, when these new realities did surface, the new turn in Uzbekistan's foreign policy was practically inevitable.

At the same time, it's worth noting that Tashkent's announcement stated that it was only suspending its membership in the CSTO; not fully withdrawing. In this regard, it is symptomatic of the statement President Vladimir Putin made during his one day visit to Tashkent on June 4th, and taking note of the fact that during the visit the two Presidents signed a declaration on deepening their bilateral strategic partnership, as well as a memorandum of understanding on taking joint measures on the accession of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the CIS Treaty on Free Trade Zone, which was signed in October 2011. These steps demonstrate that Tashkent has not completely distanced itself from Moscow, which will remain a strategic partner, but rather that it prioritizes bilateral relations when dealing with security matters. That is why the pendulum can begin swinging back.

Uzbekistan's sudden counter-integrative action not only revealed the lack of collectivity in what is called 'collective security organization', but also a more fundamental and broader issue, namely the need for revising the principles of the multilateral security arrangement in the post-Soviet space. This arrangement can be more eclectic. The latter does not deny that states can be members of a certain collective security alliance at their own choice; it only means that in contemporary Central Asia no single alliance should be considered as an exclusive and best security provider or guarantor for its members. The central and challenging question to be solved in this context, regards the mutual compatibility of the Euro-Atlantic and Euro-Asian security architectures based on the perception of common threats and the principle of indivisibility of security between these two spaces.

The ambiguous hint within the CSTO's new plan concerning Afghanistan, with which Uzbekistan could not consent to and which was one of the stated reasons it suspended its CSTO's membership, created a puzzle about this organization's capability and functionality in the Central Asian region.

The CSTO is strong enough to provide security services for its members. The recent demarche by Tashkent, however, illustrates that the CSTO, while functional, cannot meet the security needs of countries such as Uzbekistan which seek different formats for defense cooperation.

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