

# Uzbekistan Exit from CSTO Reveals Limits of Russia's Eurasian Integration Plans

Written by Nathan Hamm

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NATHAN HAMM, JUL 17 2012

On June 28, Uzbekistan announced its intention to withdraw from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a Russian-led military alliance that Moscow views as a competitor to NATO. Uzbekistan's relationship with the CSTO, much like its foreign relations in general, has run hot and cold. It was one of the original members of the organization, but it left in 1999, only to rejoin in 2006, after relations with the West had soured and ties with Russia were being vigorously improved.

Uzbekistan's CSTO withdrawal comes after several years of improving relations with the United States, which has been using the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), a logistics network running through Central Asia, to resupply war efforts in Afghanistan. Deteriorating US-Pakistan relations have greatly increased the need for and use of the NDN, and tremendous diplomatic effort has been put into expanding the types of equipment that can be moved over the route and opening the route to the transport of supplies out of Afghanistan as NATO reduces its presence in the country.

Many observers have characterized Uzbekistan's CSTO departure as signaling an erosion of Moscow's influence in Central Asia and an increase in Washington's. In an article carried by *Atlantic Sentinel*, Wikistrat analyst Michael Moreland says that Uzbekistan's withdrawal from the CSTO has turned it into a US ally in Central Asia and predicts that US will secure use of Uzbek military bases beginning in 2014. Commentators in Russia's media voiced certainty that a new US-Uzbekistan strategic alliance will soon be announced and that US troops will be allowed to be based in Uzbekistan. This conviction was strengthened by the visit of a large US Congressional delegation to Uzbekistan in early July. The Kremlin's difficulties in finalizing a basing agreement to keep the 201st Motor Rifle Division in Tajikistan and remarks by the new US ambassador in Dushanbe about the possibility of placing a US transit center in Tajikistan in early July left many Russian commentators lamenting that America had secured alliances with both countries at Moscow's expense.

The reality is, any influence that Moscow is perceived to have lost is influence it did not actually have, and any additional influence the US has gained is miniscule at best.

The US role in Central Asia has indeed increased over the past several years, and relations between Washington and Tashkent are much improved. The need for a reliable logistics route into Afghanistan has driven both of these phenomena, but they have been hard fought. Each NDN partner has sought to get as much from the US as possible in the few years that high levels of traffic will move through the network. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have moved slowly to approve new transit deals, hoping to guarantee a better deal than its neighbor.

Nevertheless, there are few signs that Central Asian governments or the United States are interested in especially robust defense relationships. The US has found predictable and productive relationships with Central Asian governments, especially Uzbekistan's, difficult and expensive to maintain. Lengthy interagency and Congressional certification processes and security assistance restrictions imposed by human rights legislation make cooperation and equipment transfers difficult, particularly in the case of Uzbekistan. Observers of the region like Columbia's Alexander Cooley, whom the AP recently quoted as saying the US is all but certain to slip lethal equipment into

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planned transfers of non-lethal equipment, are almost certainly worrying unnecessarily.

Meanwhile, no Central Asian government seems eager to participate in security assistance that comes with obligations. Kazakhstan, which has been developing a NATO-interoperable brigade with US assistance, backed away from plans to make a small troop contribution of four officers to ISAF in 2011. Uzbekistan famously has little patience to hear any criticism of its human rights records and has shown unwillingness to liberalize in exchange for economic or military assistance. Additionally, attacks on the West remain staples of the state-controlled print and broadcast media. Most Central Asian governments have expressed concerns that close cooperation with the US or NATO makes them targets for terrorists.

Aside from officially neutral Turkmenistan, every Central Asian government has a multi-vector foreign policy that manifests in periods of good, bad, and indifferent relations with the US and Russia. In Uzbekistan's case, the swings appear to take place more quickly and the extremes of its foreign shifts are much wider. When it demanded the US stop using the Karshi-Khanabad airbase in 2005, Tashkent appeared to be quickly exiting its strategic partnership with Washington and warming up to Beijing and Moscow. And when Uzbekistan announced its CSTO departure at the end of June, the appearance was of a quick rush from Russia to the US.

In both of these cases, the changes were a long time coming. Despite appearances of sudden foreign policy shifts, President Karimov's priorities have remained almost entirely static since independence.

The paramount concern in Uzbekistan's foreign policy is to defend the country's sovereignty and independence. State propaganda is peppered with pronouncements of Uzbekistan's greatness, permanence, independence, and that its people will never depend on anyone. As far back as 1996, President Karimov was declaring he would not cede "even a particle" of Uzbekistan's sovereignty to multilateral CIS institutions.

Uzbekistan is unlikely to participate in multilateral organizations that offer no benefits. It will not participate in multilateral organizations that erode its sovereignty. For most of its existence, the CSTO did very little. It held its first large-scale exercise in 2008 and established a rapid reaction force in 2009. Uzbekistan did not participate in CSTO exercises and expressed concern over the formation of the rapid reaction force. It also strongly criticized Russia's 2009 suggestion that a base be established for this force in southern Kyrgyzstan, near the border with Uzbekistan. However, CSTO paralysis during 2010's ethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan and subsequent refusal to assist the country in the aftermath of that violence revealed the alliance to still be toothless and ineffectual.

So what has changed? The CSTO is still an untested military alliance with an unclear mission among governments that frequently criticize one another. Like the CIS and other multilateral organizations composed of Soviet successor states, it is primarily a vehicle for Russian foreign policy. And it is a quiet but important shift in Russia's foreign policy that made continued membership in the CSTO a problem for Uzbekistan.

Eurasian integration has been a key priority in Vladimir Putin's foreign policy. In January, while still Russia's Prime Minister, Putin published several articles in newspapers addressing various policy issues facing the country. In these, he cites the importance of further Eurasian integration and wrote that the CSTO must be strengthened so that it can fulfill its role as "guarantor of stability in Eurasia." In just the last month, the phrase "Eurasian Integration" has been uttered by political elites across Russia and the CIS, revealing the push the Kremlin is making to strengthen organizations like the CSTO and Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) that create ties between Moscow and several Soviet successor states. Putin expressed sorrow that "brotherly Ukraine" is not part of this integration and invited its government to participate in any way it wished. Sergei Naryshkin, the Chairman of the Russian Duma, hailed the "Eurasian Integration" of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan as instrumental to giving them equal footing on the world stage. The President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, said in late June that Eurasian Integration was eroding borders between participants and creating a strong, nearly unified state.

With a renewed Russian push for Eurasian integration via multilateral organizations like the CSTO, Uzbekistan sees continued membership as a threat to its sovereignty. President Karimov believes Uzbekistan to be the most important and powerful state in Central Asia and a peer of powerful states outside of the region. If Russia's push for

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closer integration indicates that it intends to more seriously use organizations it dominates like the CSTO and EurAsEC as venues for defense and economic relations, Uzbekistan suffers a loss of power and prestige by remaining a member. As a CSTO member, Uzbekistan is a peer of Kyrgyzstan and Armenia and likely viewed less favorably than Kazakhstan. As a non-member, it is an equal peer of Russia and forces all negotiations into its bilateral relationship with Moscow where it can secure better deals.

Uzbekistan's withdrawal from the CSTO is not a victory for the US in the "New Great Game." While Uzbekistan's CSTO membership did give the Kremlin a veto over any potential US base or transit facility in Uzbekistan, it is unlikely that the US would put too much effort into securing a basing agreement with Tashkent without also speaking to Russia, which itself hosts a US military transit center in Ulyanovsk which is to become operational this August.

Meanwhile, relations between Uzbekistan and Russia are likely to continue as they have via bilateral channels. There have been no official denunciations from either side, and the Uzbek media has hardly even discussed the country's exit from the alliance. Karimov lavished Putin with praise and talked regional defense issues when the two met in Moscow following Putin's inauguration. Despite the threatened shutdown of Russian mobile operator MTS in Uzbekistan, the two countries enjoy robust economic links and Russian companies remain important players in Uzbekistan's energy sector.

However, Uzbekistan's departure from the CSTO does have important implications for the region. It is a reminder that Russia's influence has sharp limits, even in its near abroad. Uzbekistan's departure will do little to change the behavior of other CSTO members in Central Asia. In fact, it makes the organization more cohesive. Nevertheless, all of the governments in Central Asia are protective of their sovereignty and ability to act independently of Russia. Other CSTO members will continue to participate in the development of the alliance, but it is unlikely that they will continue if doing so places serious limits on their sovereignty. Keeping the alliance watered down and ill-defined works fairly well for most of the Central Asian members. Going forward, Russia will probably have to temper its hopes for meaningful, rapid integration in Eurasia.

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