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Kazakhstan called for assistance. Why did Russia dispatch troops so quickly?

Preserving autocracies is a primary goal for regional organizations like the CSTO.

By Alexander Cooley

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On Jan. 5, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) agreed to send troops to help the Kazakh government quell mounting political unrest. What had started as protests against a rise in fuel prices in the western city of Zhanaozen rapidly turned into broad demonstrations against government corruption and lack of reforms across Kazakhstan’s major cities, including the largest city of Almaty. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev blamed the protests on a “terrorist threat.”

The CSTO’s rotating chair, Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan, granted Tokayev’s request for assistance within hours — following “all-night consultations” that included Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko. Russian troops comprised the bulk of the 2,500 dispatched, reportedly tasked with securing Almaty airport, major energy facilities and the Russian-operated cosmodrome at Baikonur.

What is the CSTO?

What does this deployment mean — and what is the CSTO? Some analysts see the deployment of Russian troops as analogous to the Soviet Union's intervention in the domestic affairs of Warsaw Pact countries. But this first intervention by the Eurasian security organization isn't a callback to the Cold War. My research suggests it's a sign of the rise of contemporary regional organizations designed to protect the survival of autocratic regimes.

The Collective Security Treaty Organization currently has six members — Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It has its origins as the Collective Security Treaty, signed in 1992 as a follow-up to the Commonwealth of Independent States, formed after the Soviet Union dissolved.

The CSTO has been building its capacity since the 2000s — in part as a reaction to the U.S. military presence in Central Asia. It enacted the legal framework for Russian military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, allowed members to buy weapons at Russian domestic rates and pursued a common air defense system. Decision-making is greatly influenced by Russia, but countries have joined and then withdrawn (Uzbekistan joined in 2006 and then withdrew again in 2012). The organization features a rotating chairmanship and an interparliamentary assembly.

Western policymakers and analysts largely dismiss the CSTO as an unconvincing attempt to mimic Western organizations like NATO. U.S. and NATO policymakers refused to engage with the CSTO or treat it as a regional security organization, to avoid granting it legitimacy.

The CSTO has boosted its capacity

Regional scholars note the CSTO's increasing capabilities. In 2009, for instance, the CSTO established a rapid response force. In December 2010, it adopted new rules on interventions, allowing the organization to deploy peacekeepers to deal with domestic unrest in member countries.

The CSTO's record of nonintervention — even when members had urgently requested the dispatch of troops — helped support the prevailing view that the CSTO was mere legal fiction. For example, Kyrgyzstan's acting premier appealed to Russia in 2010 to send forces under CSTO auspices to rein in clashing Kyrgyz and Uzbek ethnic mobs.

In autumn 2020, the organization rebuffed Armenia's appeal for assistance in the renewed conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabakh and surrounding territories. In both cases, CSTO officials cited legal reasons why its mandate prevented interventions, but Russia also seemed reluctant to be drawn into these regional conflicts.

Why Kazakhstan?

Given the history of CSTO inaction, why did Russia agree with such haste to support the CSTO's intervention in Kazakhstan? For one, both Russia and Belarus fear large-scale protests could reverberate across the region (including in their own countries), especially if inspired or supported by foreign influences.

And Russian and CSTO forces have now effectively weighed into a domestic political clash. The political crisis in Kazakhstan is not merely one of bottom-up protests. It is also a high-level power struggle between current President Tokayev and former president Nursultan Nazarbayev.

Nazarbayev officially stepped down as president in 2019, but continued his influence as chairman of the country's Security Council. His family and allies still control most of the country's lucrative strategic and extractive industries. By intervening now, Russia is signaling to any wavering Kazakh security forces that power and authority firmly reside with Tokayev.

Reports now indicate that Nazarbayev's main political ally (as well as twice former prime minister, and intelligence chief head), Karim Massimov, was arrested on charges of treason. A spokesman for Nazarbayev claimed the former president is in the capital, Nur-Sultan, despite rumors that he and his family members may have fled abroad.

How regional organizations reinforce autocracy

The evolving situation in Kazakhstan supports international relations scholarship about Russian (and Chinese-led) regional organizations in Central Asia. Many experts view the true role of these organizations as defending the autocratic regimes and practices of their members, rather than promoting integration.

The CSTO is an example of what international relations scholar Roy Allison's calls "protective integration." While ostensibly a military organization, the CSTO serves a larger role, protecting authoritarian governments by fostering a regional "culture of interaction, normative bonding, and collective political solidarity."

And the CSTO is just one example of the increased role of international organizations in the rise of what political scientists Alexander Libman and Anastasia Obydenkova term "authoritarian regionalism," a phenomenon Dan Nexon and I also explore in our book on the waning of the U.S.-led global liberal order. In the 1990s and early 2000s regional organizations seemed to promote democratic values and procedures. The trend now — especially in Eurasia — is for regional groups to defend autocracy in member nations by redistributing resources and providing legitimacy to politically embattled rulers.

What's the endgame in Kazakhstan?

Protesters — and others critical of the regime — may view Russia's actions as an unacceptable violation of Kazakhstan's sovereignty, and question the validity of the "peacekeeping" concept as applied to CSTO troops. And they may predict that Tokayev lacks the legitimacy and capacity to quell social unrest without introducing real reforms to address pressing issues like rising prices, perceptions of elite corruption and Kazakhstan's stark economic inequalities.

But Tokayev appears to be doubling down on repression — he dismissed international calls for a peaceful solution and negotiations with protesters as "idiocy" and warned on Friday that his security forces would "shoot to kill without warning."

This week may have "changed Kazakhstan forever," but Russia's intervention under CSTO auspices crystallizes an ongoing trend: Regional organizations, leaders and norms worldwide are bolstering autocracies and promoting illiberal norms and practices.

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