

Uzbekistan's Suspension of CSTO Membership: Policy as Usual in Tashkent

Written by Bernardo Teles Fazendeiro

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BERNARDO TELES FAZENDEIRO, JUL 19 2012

On the 28th June 2012, Uzbekistan decided to suspend its membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) – a Moscow-sponsored security organization consisting of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Armenia and Belarus. Whilst the secretive and suspicious nature of the Uzbekistani regime makes it difficult to predict specific policy decisions, the withdrawal from CSTO did not come as a surprise. Indeed, Tashkent has long been against Russia's military plans for Central Asia and placed a variety of conditions on furthering CSTO's integration, namely the creation of the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces (CRRF).

Instead, novelty lies in the timing of the decision, coinciding more or less with the early June NATO-Uzbekistani agreement to withdraw from Afghanistan. This fact has led to speculations about whether Tashkent is seeking to revamp its security relationship with the United States, perhaps even by allowing Washington to reopen a military base on its territory.[1] Clearly, the timing of the decision and Tashkent's stronger relationship with the United States warrants this kind of speculation. However, analyzing Uzbekistan's withdrawal requires a subtler look into its general foreign policy and its bilateral relationship with Russia.

Importantly, Tashkent's relationship with Moscow remains strong: Russia is still the main supplier of military hardware to Uzbekistan and its main trade partner. CSTO is just one dimension of that complex relationship, and the decision to suspend the membership is mostly the result of an explicit remonstrance against Moscow's military encroachment upon Central Asia.

In order to understand Uzbekistan's scepticism towards Moscow's security schemes, it is necessary to look first at its specific foreign policy goals and the recent history of the Russian-Uzbekistani security relationship. Moreover, it is crucial to look at the reasons behind Uzbekistan's accession to CSTO back in 2006, especially in the light of its long-established reluctance to join military pacts. As not all information has been disclosed, it is still difficult to fully determine why Uzbekistan suspended its membership in the late June 2012 and not earlier; however, this essay will seek to provide the possible explanation.

Uzbekistan's reluctance toward Russian military encroachment

Uzbekistan's President, Islam Karimov, has consistently been a staunch advocate of demilitarizing Central Asia:[2] a stance that has little to do with fostering goodwill and more with the ambition to strengthen Uzbekistan's regional leadership. From a merely materialist point of view, this is a conceivable goal, since in terms of population, Uzbekistan is by far the largest state in former Soviet Central Asia (with about 28 million people), and is also a pivotal country, surrounded by all the region's land-locked states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and also Afghanistan).

Being aware of Uzbekistani ambitions, Russia hopes to preserve certain military options in Central Asia in order to advance its own interests and deter Uzbekistan from coercing neighbours.[3] The effects of this policy were witnessed by President Karimov during Tajikistan's Civil War; in the late 1990s, Karimov was hoping to propound his own favoured parties to Tajikistani government, but Moscow responded by offering both political and military support

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to current Tajikistani President Emomali Rahmon. Consequently, Russia went against Uzbekistan's ambitions by allowing Mr Rahmon to forsake rival opponents favoured by Uzbekistan.[4] This was a blow to Uzbekistan's regional aims, which fostered Tashkent's strong opposition to Russia's military presence in the region.

Besides deterrence and possible future intervention, President Karimov is also aware that Russia might not be a reliable partner. This was perhaps one of the main reasons why Uzbekistan first decided to abandon the Collective Security Treaty (CST) in 1999. At the time, Uzbekistani authorities were apprehensive about the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, who had managed to destabilize the Uzbekistani-Afghan border. Despite the existing quarrels within the CIS, it seems that President Karimov had hoped for CIS solidarity toward Uzbekistan's precarious situation. Consequently, Tashkent was disappointed when it found Moscow either unwilling or unable to supply requested military equipment.[5]

Having that in mind, Russian military presence is seen as a challenge to Uzbekistan's regional aims. President Karimov sees Moscow's ambitions as a means of furthering Russia's own interests, which do not always coincide with Uzbekistan's. This explains Tashkent's resistance toward Russia's 201st Motor Rifle Division in Tajikistan and the Russian air base in Kyrgyzstan.

Whilst preventing Moscow's military ambitions in the region is one of President Karimov's main concerns, it then becomes difficult to reconcile this stance with the decision to join Russian sponsored CSTO in 2006. This apparent contradiction can only be understood within the difficult political context of that period and, as will be shown below, was not entirely inconsistent with Uzbekistan's typical non-militaristic stance.

A member in the name only: the reasons for joining the CSTO in 2006 and the difficult relationship that followed

A possible explanation as to why Uzbekistan joined the CSTO in 2006 would be that after facing Western sanctions for the tragic 2005 uprising in Andijan (187 were killed according to Uzbekistan's official estimates), President Karimov decided to balance against Washington by realigning with Moscow. This could have been a plausible explanation if Uzbekistan had indeed accommodated Moscow and changed its long-term policies with regards to Central Asian demilitarization. That seemed to be the case when President Karimov stipulated that some of the country's laws would have to be modified in order to meet the standards of the Eurasian Economic Community (Eurasec), which Uzbekistan also joined in early 2006.[6].

Nevertheless, contrary to Russia's will, none of these statements were translated into a change in Uzbekistan's policy. In fact, at the time, the Secretary General of the CSTO recognized the difficulty of Uzbekistan becoming a member of the organization despite Russia's enthusiasm for greater regional integration.[7] Perhaps a more evident sign that Uzbekistan was not taking multilateral security seriously was President Karimov's call in late 2006 for merging Eurasec and CSTO,[8] effectively contradicting Russia's aims to keep both organizations. While the latter was meant for collective military action, the former was intended to foster greater economic cooperation.

Given the fact that joining CSTO was not a clear breakaway from Uzbekistan's long-term strategy, the decision was mostly context-driven during a particularly troubling time for Uzbekistani political establishment. Russia gave overwhelming support to President Karimov after the Andijan crisis, and so he responded with a grand political gesture by joining CSTO and Eurasec. By doing so, President Karimov also signalled his appreciation for President Putin's role in establishing a long-term relationship with Uzbekistan. Ever since being elected in 2000, President Putin sought to strengthen Russia's connection with Central Asia by focusing on trade and bilateral relationships. This resulted in one of the more positive moments in the two countries' recent history, formalized under the Strategic Partnership Agreement of 2004. At the time, Uzbekistan even agreed to organise a joint military exercises with Russia.

Another reason behind Uzbekistan's original decision to join CSTO was the deteriorating relationship with the United States. Consequently, propounding stronger relations with Russia was the only way, in which Tashkent could guarantee important arms supplies. Even though Russia and Uzbekistan had never ceased to foment their security

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relationship, joining CSTO was perhaps the best means of obtaining cheap and essential Russian military parts as well as weapons for Uzbekistan's military apparatus. This would then explain why President Karimov advocated merging CSTO with Eurasec, since he sought to obtain economic advantages and downplay the coordinated security dimension of the organization. Consequently, none of the reasons for President Karimov joining CSTO meant shifting foreign policy, nor were they entirely pro-Russian or anti-American. Rather, the CSTO was the best means for Uzbekistan to prevent losing political and military clout after the Andijan crisis.

Nevertheless, CSTO soon became perceived as undesirable once Russia sought to advance with greater integration. In 2008, the Russian Federation called for the creation of a Common Rapid Response Force (CRRF) within the CSTO framework, the implementation of which was decided in June 2009. Uzbekistani leadership was deeply skeptical and decided first to not attend the Yerevan CSTO summit in April 2009, and then rejected the joint CSTO decision to create the CRRF later in June.[9] Overall, Tashkent consistently argued that implementing collective forces should be based on consensus; that there should be guarantees against internal CSTO intervention; and that the CRRF should only be used against external aggression.[10]

President Karimov thus showed once more that little had changed in his desire to hinder Russia's greater military integration in the region. As negotiations persisted, Uzbekistan continuously blocked CSTO's integration plans. The apparent stalemate resulted in Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko lambasting against Uzbekistan's uncompromising position in December 2011, calling President Karimov either to accommodate the CRRF or leave the organization.[11]

Taking into account Tashkent's continuous reluctance to CSTO and the fact that it never fully participated in any of the organization's military exercises, Uzbekistan was a member in name only. Therefore, leaving the organization in late June 2012 was not only expected but also consistent with the Uzbekistan's long-established stance in the region. Nevertheless, this is not enough to explain Uzbekistan's decision.

Improving relationship with the United States?

Understanding why Uzbekistan decided to suspend CSTO in late June rather than before is impossible at this moment, simply because no explanation was offered publicly by Uzbekistani authorities, and little is known about Uzbekistan's extremely closed power circle. As mentioned above, one of the explanations given in the press is that the United States might have hinted at reestablishing a military base in Uzbekistan, going against CSTO statutes. This, however, remains just a rumor and it seems that anonymous sources in the American embassy have disconfirmed this possibility.[12] In fact, given Washington's desire to demobilize from Afghanistan, and the fact that it was expelled from Uzbekistan's Karshi-Khanabad base in 2005, it seems unlikely that it would seek to reopen a military facility in Uzbekistan. Speculation aside, Uzbekistan already hosts a German military contingent in Termez. Hence, even if base politics was part of the reason for suspending CSTO membership, it is not enough to clarify Uzbekistan's late June decision.

Perhaps the more plausible explanation is that the confidential agreement signed in early June with NATO allows Uzbekistan to obtain some security guarantees and military material.[13] This would mean that it would no longer have to rely on Russia, which is in line with Uzbekistan's long-term objective to remove dependence and preserve freedom of action in the international arena. Another perspective offered by Roger McDermott focuses on Russia's viewpoint, stating that some officials in the Kremlin are content with Uzbekistan's decision to suspend membership, since this would allow CSTO to become operational.[14] In fact, this thesis points to undisclosed Russian sources, which mention that Alexander Lukashenko's lambasting against Uzbekistan in December 2011 was deliberately staged in order to pressurize President Karimov to decide between integration and withdrawal from the organization.

In sum, it is impossible to determine the precise reasons behind Uzbekistan's decision to leave CSTO, but it is clear that from the start it did not seek security integration. At any rate, Uzbekistan's temporary membership within CSTO served mostly to hamper the organization's significance, while simultaneously obtaining some military goods. Therefore, so long as the current Uzbekistani establishment stays in power, it shall persist as a staunch opponent to Russian military integration in Central Asia, a region it sees as its own sphere of influence.

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[1] See the following two articles: Panfilova, V. "Uzbekistan Returning To US. Tashkent Becoming Ally of Washington In Anti-Iran Campaign" *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (July 4 2012). <<https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>> and "Uzbekistan's withdrawal from CSTO is loyalty signal to U.S. – Russian military expert" *Newswire* (July 4 2012). <<https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>>.

[2] See the following two statements by President Karimov of Uzbekistan: "President visits Eastern region – Full Version" *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts* (August 23 2001). <<https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>>

"Uzbek President gives wide-ranging interview to Russian paper" *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts* (January 20 2005) <<https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>>.

[3] Allison, R. "Strategic Reassertion in Russia's Central Asia Policy" *International Affairs*, (80:2). 2004. 288.

[4] Fairbanks, C. et al. *Strategic Assessment of Central Asia*. Washington: Central Asia-

Caucasus Institute, John Hopkins University. (2001). 49. <http://www.acus.org/docs/0101-Strategic_Assessment_Central_Eurasia.pdf>

[5] Information obtained in a confidential interview made between 2009-2012.

[6] "Uzbekistan sets limits for cooperation with Russia." *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, (March 10 2006) <<https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>>.

[7] "Uzbekistan sets limits for cooperation with Russia." *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts* (March 10^t 2006). <<https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>>

[8] "Uzbek leader moots merger of CIS security body, Eurasian economic bloc" *BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit* (August 16 2006). <<https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>>.

[9] Akhmadov, E. "Uzbekistan and the CSTO: Why not collective first response forces?" *Central Asia Caucasus Institute Analysis*, Washington. 2009. < <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5151>>.

[10] Tolipov, F. "CSTO: Collective Security or Collective Confusion" *Central Asia Caucasus Institute Analysis*, Washington. 2009 <<http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5168>>

[11] Blagov, S. "CSTO faces continued divisions" *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor* (9:21) 2012. <http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=38952>

[12] Leonard, P. "US Cozies up to outcast Uzbekistan for Afghan role" *ABC News* (July 6 2012). < <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/us-cozies-outcast-uzbekistan-afghan-role-16723834>>.

[13] "Interview: Analyst says Uzbekistan's suspension shows CSTO is 'Irrelevant'" *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (July 15 2012). < <http://www.rferl.org/content/interview-analyst-says-uzbekistan-suspension-shows-csto>>

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irrelevant/24629921.html>

[14] McDermott, J, "The Bear And The Bison Streamline The CSTO" *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor* (9:132). 2012. <http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=39619&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=13&cHash=20e8d1bed59fc983428fb787f1bbba29>.

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