

Russia's Vision in Crisis for CSTO Military Forces

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Russian President Dmitry Medvedev (R), Russian Defence Minister Anatoly Serdyukov (2nd R), Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev (L) and Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan (2nd L) look at CSTO Rapid Deployment Forces military outfit items during a restricted meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) leaders in Moscow on June 14, 2009.

On June 14, after the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) summit in Moscow formally created its new Collective Operational Reaction Forces (CORF), Russian President Dmitry Medvedev hailed this achievement as a "step toward creating a military force to be reckoned with, truly capable of responding to a variety of threats." During his press conference Medvedev said "certain discussions" were held with CSTO countries still to commit to this collective military force and that such delays were normal, since new structures cannot be formed "overnight."

Medvedev continued:

"We are open to the possibility that our partners who have not yet signed these documents will ultimately sign them later, after giving it some thought and evaluating the situation. I am referring to Uzbekistan, which has a number of doubts, but has not excluded the possibility itself. The President of Uzbekistan said he would analyze certain aspects to resume discussion of the agreement at a later stage. The same is true of Belarus, which was not present at our summit today, but which, we hope, will resume these talks and make the decision on its participation in the CORF, especially since both countries have supported its creation" (www.kremlin.ru, June 14).

However, on June 23 the Uzbek foreign ministry issued a statement clarifying the government's stance on the new CORF structure. Uzbekistan supports the military element of the force being used only to repulse "foreign aggression," but at that point it parts company with the other CSTO members, and most importantly rejects the approach to the orientation and future development of the CORF as advocated by Moscow.

Tashkent refrained from signing the agreement to form the new rapid reaction force, based on the absence of a number of "principled positions," missing from the document. Apparently reflecting their fundamental objection to the CORF, Tashkent questioned the need to create a military structure which might be deployed during an internal conflict within a member state; a number of issues stemmed from this core theme. The force should under "no circumstances" become involved in the resolution of frozen conflicts. In the event of a domestic crisis, Tashkent believes "that each CSTO member state is able to resolve its domestic conflicts and problems by its own forces without involving armed forces from abroad" (Uzbekistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs press release, June 23).

While this statement appeared to question the whole *raison d'être* underlying the CORF agreement, a far greater issue of principle emerged. Tashkent subtly attacked the lack of consensus over the force, already in doubt owing to the non-attendance of Belarus at the CSTO summit. Although presumably the other members were satisfied about the circumstances within which the CORF might be operationally deployed, Uzbekistan openly questioned the mechanism for activating the force. "At the same time, a mechanism for making decisions on its use should be based on the absolute observation of the principle of consensus," the foreign ministry statement continued, implying that Tashkent believes one or more members could choose to deploy the forces in the absence of unanimity within the organization. Uzbek suspicion of the motives behind the Russian initiative to transform the former CSTO rapid reaction forces into a new "NATO-like structure" could not be clearer: "the CORF should not be turned into a tool to resolve some disputed issues not only within the CSTO but also in the CIS space" (Uzbekistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs press release, June 23).

Since there are a number of frozen conflicts within the CIS, Tashkent would like the CSTO to rule out even the slightest implication that this collective force could intervene in any of these circumstances. The absence of clarity on this point in the content of the document was a critical factor in the decision to postpone becoming a signatory.

Uzbekistan also strongly objected to the potential for the new force to override the national legislation of the CSTO members, arguing that sending contingents to the

territories of other states, or deploying it within the CSTO area should not contradict existing laws. Belarus and Uzbekistan are both constitutionally prohibited from sending military forces beyond their own territories. This point makes a complete farce of the CORF, since in order to have either country participate in an exercise (or operation) would entail hosting it on their territory, which explains why one part of the military exercise planned for August and September was scheduled to be staged in Belarus.

Finally, one potentially embarrassing issue raised by Tashkent relates to the timing of the planned CORF military exercises. The force currently lacks any real legal basis, since it has yet to be ratified by the parliaments of its member states: Moscow has effectively argued that the document has temporarily come into force. "In this case, the meaning of the document's ratification is lost, and the opinions of the parliaments of the CSTO member states are fully ignored," added the Uzbek foreign ministry's press release (ITAR-TASS, June 23).

Uzbekistan's principled legal and political objections to the CORF, linked to critical issues such as consensus and practical issues surrounding the new force were dismissed by one independent military analyst in Moscow as "eccentric" (Ezhednevny Zhurnal, June 15). However, though the Uzbek stance has not been supported through the CSTO, its objections are legitimate and unlikely to be resolved as quickly as Medvedev hopes without radically revising the agreement. In any case, Tashkent's policy toward the CORF has hardened since it was first mooted during the informal CSTO meeting in Borovoye December 19-21, 2008 (which Uzbekistan refused to attend), and formally announced on February 4 at the CSTO summit in Moscow (Rossiya TV, Interfax, RIA Novosti, ITAR-TASS, February 4).

Tashkent initially expressed interest in the transformation of the CSTO force structure, but after it became clear that Moscow would not permit "equal participation" from other member states it opted to participate on an ad hoc basis. The lack of consensus building by Moscow in the interim has served to influence the Uzbek government to step back from the agreement, and consequently weakens the Kremlin's aspiration to dominate Central Asia.