

Alliance Cohesion Under Hegemonic Leadership: A Comparative Analysis of NATO and CSTO Crisis Response

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Abstract:

The paper looks at two different paths of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in the context of crisis intervention, specifically at NATO's Afghanistan mission (2001-2021) and CSTO's Kazakhstan operation (Jan 2022) as comparative case studies. Both organisations have formal mechanisms for consensus based decision making and have collective defence clauses, but not all that effective or cohesive. This study contends that hegemonic dependency, namely the structural focus of military power and political initiative in a single member state, generates a trade-off between the two: decisiveness and institutional legitimacy. The CSTO's quick and efficient response in Kazakhstan within two weeks was tactical but also exposed as the role of the CSTO as an internal instrument for regime security for a select group of authoritarian regimes, thus creating legitimacy problems for other member states with conflicting security interests. Burden sharing was diffused among NATO, allowing for continuity of operations but leaving to the end of each mission a chronic coordination issue and eventual failure. The results offer insights into alliance theory in that they show that consensus alone is not enough to create cohesion, rather the power imbalances and shared norms are important.

Key Words: Alliance cohesion, collective defense; NATO, CSTO, hegemonic stability, crisis intervention, burden-sharing, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) has been likened to a NATO-style security pact, which is a post-Soviet alliance with a collective defense clause, decision-making bodies and joint military drills, but instead of the former Western bloc of nations, it comprises the former Soviet bloc nations. However, there are some key differences between the two organizations based on their operational history. For 20 years, NATO has been operating its most extended and ambitious out-of-area mission in Afghanistan, involving some 130,000 troops at their peak, from more than 50 member countries. In January 2022, the CSTO's first-ever coordinated action took place in Kazakhstan and included some 2,500 soldiers, mostly Russian (TASS, 2022a), and lasted only two weeks. This is an important question that needs to be asked: why do two organizations with structurally similar institutional designs exhibit so divergent alliance behaviors?

The puzzle is further complicated by the CSTO's formal adoption of NATO structures: Both organizations are based on consensus decision-making, both have standing rapid-reaction forces, and both have mutual defense pledges in founding documents. It is the structure of power and the normative bases of the alliance, rather than institutional design that is the critical variable, this paper argues. The CSTO is a hegemonic dependency system where Russia provides most of the military, financial and command power. This focus makes the alliance capable of fast and efficient response to narrow regime survival crises, such as in Kazakhstan, but makes it unable to conduct multilateral operations for a long time and causes legitimacy crises for the members with conflicting security interests. NATO's less concrete burden sharing arrangements, however, cause recurring problems of coordination and "free-riding" discussions, while the common democratic normative framework ensures the existence and continued existence of the organization, even in the event of mission failures.

The paper is divided into four parts. In Section 2, the theoretical literature pertaining to the literature on alliance cohesion and the design of alliances is reviewed. Section 3 discusses NATO's experience in Afghanistan, in terms of burden sharing and consensus politics in mission evolution. In Section 4, the CSTO's Kazakhstan operation is analyzed, looking at the decision-making process and what conditions were conducive to the rapid deployment of the CSTO. Section 5 examines the two cases on the basis of the three dimensions of burden-sharing, decision-making and intervention type, thereby testing the hegemonic dependency thesis. The book ends with conclusions on the implications for alliance theory and the future of Russia-led security institutions in Section 6.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ALLIANCE COHESION AND INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN

2.1 Neoliberal Institutionalism

According to neoliberal institutionalism international institutions will create cooperation among states with diverging interests, as they will lower the transaction costs and increase transparency. In this way, consensus-based decision-making creates legitimacy and buy-in which command-based decision making can't. The fact that there is a formal institutional resemblance between NATO and the CSTO, both of which have to reach consensus on important decisions, and both have parliamentary or council-level control, suggests that the institutions influence behavior irrespective of power distributions, as is assumed by the neoliberal theory.

2.2 Realist Alliance Theory and Hegemonic Leadership

There is an alternative version based on realism, realist scholarship. In this perspective alliances are tools of state power and that they are cohesive relies on the confluence of interests of the participants, not on institutional design. According to hegemonic stability theory, the dominant power can also provide the collective goods which smaller powers cannot provide, such as a security guarantee, command and control infrastructure, and interoperable equipment. But dependency also brings with it a feeling of obligation and dependent allies may be willing to comply, but not necessarily with enthusiasm, since it is less expensive to openly defy than to remain silent and not participate.

2.3 The Hegemonic Dependency Model

This paper combines these viewpoints in a hegemonic dependency approach to alliance behaviour. According to the model, if one member contributes an excessive military force and/or political drive, the alliance will be characterized by the following:

- a) High tactical responsiveness in crisis situations which directly challenge the hegemon's interests and/or client regimes;
- b) Low strategic sustainability for complex, prolonged operations, that truly need the contribution of several parties;
- c) Symbolic participation by smaller members, who may not contribute substantively but they may participate at all; and
- d) Legitimacy deficits as the alliance is perceived both internally and externally as an instrument of the hegemon rather than a genuine collective security community

The main idea of the model is that the formal rules of consensus are epiphenomenal, that is, they do not guarantee nor preclude cohesion. But it's important to see if the power dynamics and norms of the alliance are robust enough to withstand the emergence of conflict.

3. CASE STUDY: NATO IN AFGHANISTAN (2001–2021)

3.1 Origins and Initial Unity

Article 5 of the NATO Charter was invoked for the first time in the NATO's history on 12th September 2001, one day after the attacks of Al-Qaeda on the USA. The invocation was symbolic, it made one member of the alliance a terrorist attack and all of them. But it also showed the structural imbalance of the alliance. The U.S. had the military means to act alone, and NATO would be tasked with giving political legitimacy and additional forces. In December 2001, under the auspices of the UN Security Council, a small group of willing states formed the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). NATO took command in August 2003 and the mission's mandate was broadened to include counter-insurgency and reconstruction throughout the country, rather than just in Kabul. ISAF consisted of about 130,000 troops from fifty countries, the United States providing about 40% of the troops and most of the costs.

3.2 Burden-Sharing Debates and National Caveats

The issue of burden sharing in Afghanistan was a constant source of conflict. The U.S. continually pushed its European partners for more combat forces in the south and east, where the Taliban were most resilient. Many allies, however, kept their forces relatively inactive in the north and west and had “national caveats” which limited their operations. It was a division of labor that enabled allies to be politically involved with minimum casualties although the heaviest fighting was borne by American, British, Canadian and Dutch troops.

The burden sharing issue was not only a question of capacity, but also one of political will. In many European countries, public opinion was divided with regard to the Afghanistan mission and the governments were worried about the possible repercussions of the war on their electoral results with rising casualties. What emerged was a sort of “buck-passing” balance, in which allies roam around American security provision, and take credit for being part of it.

3.3 Consensus Politics and Mission Creep

The very elements that made NATO a legitimate body in terms of decision making also paralysed it. ISAF has grown its mandate from stabilization to counter-narcotics and training Afghan security forces, and all expansions have been unanimous by the 28 (then 30) members. Alliances required a certain amount of mission creep, which was not achieved. The 2014 withdrawal was negotiated between the United States and the Taliban, with the NATO allies informed not consulted, and the 2010 Lisbon Summit deadline was extended until 2014.

The final withdrawal took place in August 2021, and was chaotic and widely viewed as a failure. With the withdrawal of the western forces, the Taliban had taken over Kabul and the Afghan government had fallen within a few weeks. The result posed key questions for NATO on its ability to conduct continued out-of-area operations. The coalition never split up, however, no member protested and subsequent cooperation did occur. The common normative basis, namely “Democratic solidarity” and “Rules-based order” kept the alliance together during the crisis.

4. CASE STUDY: CSTO IN KAZAKHSTAN (JANUARY 2022)

4.1 The Crisis and the Request

Protests broke out in Kazakhstan in January 2022, in response to an unexpected rise in the prices of Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG). The protests quickly spread from the western oil city of Zhanaozen to Almaty, where protesters rampaged through government buildings, taking weapons. On January 5, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev declared the disturbances as "a terrorist threat" facilitated by "external interference" and requested the CSTO to help (The Diplomat, 2022).

The CSTO's reaction was quick. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, who was in the chair of the Collective Security Council, announced the decision of the Council to deploy peacekeeping forces within 24 hours. The Russian force, which is estimated at 2,000 to 2,500 troops from Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, started to arrive in advance on January 6 and the full force arrived within several days (TASS, 2022b; Qazinform, 2022). Russian aircraft carried around 2,500 peacekeepers and 250 vehicles to Kazakhstan in some 110 flights, CSTO Secretary General Stanislav Zas told TASS (2022c). The forces were deployed to ensure security of strategic facilities and support the work of the law enforcement bodies of Kazakhstan. They didn't fire a single shot and were evacuated by January 19 (TASS, 2022d).

4.2 Decision-Making: Rapid and Hierarchical

What was amazing about the decision making was the speed and lack of substantive debate. Within hours after the Collective Security Council made the decision that planes were to be sent to aid (TASS, 2022c). The operation was clearly Russian dominated, as it is estimated that 3,000 Russian troops were deployed, 500 from Belarus, 200 from Tajikistan, and 70 from Armenia (The Diplomat, 2022).

The parliament of Kyrgyzstan approved sending 150 troops on January 7 with 69 deputies voting for and 7 against. The hearing was closed to the public at Kamchybek Tashiyev's request, who leads the State Committee for National Security. Lawmaker Zhanybek Kydykbayev objected: "According to CSTO regulations, we can send humanitarian aid, but not the army, what if we send the army, and they get provocation? If there's a problem with our armed forces, what then? Who will be responsible for that? (Eurasianet, 2022b). The Kyrgyz Defense Minister said that the troops would come from the elite Scorpion

Spetsnaz unit, which would include only officers and warrant officers, and would not include young soldiers (Eurasianet, 2022b).

Not all Kyrgyz were in favor of the decision and it was met with opposition. Twenty or so protesters lined up in front of parliament with banners that read "Kyrgyz and Kazakhs are family" and "CSTO is Russia, hands off Kazakhstan" (Eurasianet, 2022b). Political analyst Edil Osmonbetov told Eurasianet it was merely an effort to "clean up the CSTO's image," which had come under fire for its lack of action. The CSTO had, at least twice, rejected demands: during the ethnic unrest in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, and when Azerbaijan was making military incursions in Armenia in 2021 (Eurasianet, 2022b).

The participation of Armenia in the event created a lot of controversy within its country. The CSTO has not responded to Armenia's requests for help in May and November 2021 during Azerbaijani incursions, which led to a question about the application of the concept of collective defense in the alliance (IWPR, 2022). According to a statement signed by 20 Armenian civil society organizations, the same CSTO failed to take any action on the issue of external aggression against Armenia "on the ground" (IWPR, 2022). From a democratic perspective, it was ill-advised for Armenia to take such a hasty decision in a matter of several hours, military expert Karen Hovhannisyan said (IWPR, 2022).

The decision was defended by Armenian Security Council Secretary Armen Grigoryan who said: "First of all, it's a matter of responsibility, if Armenia has an interest in the CSTO mechanisms functioning, and the answer is a clear yes" (Eurasianet, 2022a). He also challenged the description of what was going on in Kazakhstan as a legitimate protest: "It is not a revolutionary process, but a terrorist one, you have seen the videos of armed men" (Eurasianet, 2022a).

4.3 Hegemonic Dependency in Operation

The Kazakhstan operation was a case in point of the CSTO's reliance on the Russian capability and initiative. Most of the troops, transport aircraft and command staff were supplied by Russia. This was possible only because the operation was not one that required real multilateral coordination – Russia could send its soldiers and allies would join for "nominal" participation. The mission was quite limited in terms of what it was protecting – facilities as opposed to suppression of protests directly – which further limited the need for complex interoperability.

Yulia Nikitina, a researcher at the Moscow Institute of International and Developmental Studies (MGIMO University), explained to Eurasianet that the "military" part of the operation was not the main issue, but rather political signaling: "Political signaling was more important than the military part of the operation, that is why this operation was considered to be successful" (Eurasianet, 2022c). The main purpose of the deployment was to provide Tokayev with moral support, and not order.

In practice the withdrawal was a fast and one-sided one. On January 13, it appeared that the mission was over, as Putin announced "Overall, it's time to return home. We have accomplished our task" (TASS, 2022a). On January 19, CSTO Peacekeeping Contingent Commander Colonel General Andrey Serdyukov announced that the peacekeeping contingent of five countries "managed to carry out the tasks assigned to them. Not a single provocation was allowed against the peacekeepers" (TASS, 2022d).

5. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

5.1 Burden-Sharing

The burden sharing issue is very peculiar. NATO's Afghanistan mission was a diffuse effort of dozens of allies, and caused chronic discussions about equity and free-riding, but also assured no single member

taking on all the costs. The CSTO's Kazakhstan operation was actually a Russian one, with a small number of allied troops. More than 2,000 peacekeepers and some 250 vehicles were flown by Russian Aerospace Forces, with some 110 flights made (TASS, 2022c). Zas said that the task was fulfilled with the help of "each one of our allies", but Russia's involvement was much greater than that of the other three (Belarus, Armenia, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) (TASS, 2022c). The Diplomat estimated that Russia has deployed 3,000 troops, Belarus 500 troops, Tajikistan 200 troops and Armenia 70 troops (2022).

The difference is not just in the rules of the game, but also in the structure of the game. The CSTO is not able to force contributions from its weaker members – Russia's influence is determined by its military strength and the lack of viable options for its smaller members. NATO's non-concentrated burden-sharing was a result of NATO's initial military objective, which was to deter the Soviet aggression, and the military strength of its members within the European block.

5.2 Decision-Making

Both organisations have a formal consensus-based approach in practice, but there are differences in the meaning of consensus. Consensus in NATO implied bargaining and side-payments and taking on various national views. ISAF force contributions were not something that the USA could dictate; it was something that had to be negotiated with allies, caveats had to be accepted and public opinion had to be managed in the forces contributing states. This slowed down decisions and sometimes left them unreadable but it also brought "buy-in" and "legitimacy" from the participants.

The CSTO is a consensus-based organisation where consensus is largely a formality. The Kazakhstan decision was taken at the presidential level, without consulting the other members. In Kyrgyzstan the parliamentary vote took place in closed doors, and opposition politicians complained the vote was rushed, and other options like humanitarian aid were not taken into consideration (Eurasianet, 2022b). The move in Armenia had sparked public criticism and public backlash against the government as a "fig-leaf" for the authoritarian states (IWPR, 2022).

5.3 Intervention Type and Alliance Function

There are two cases that illustrate two different types of alliance functions. NATO's Afghanistan mission was an out-of-area stabilisation and counter-insurgency mission with the need for a sustained force presence, multi-agency civil-military coordination and nation-building. The CSTO's Kazakhstan mission was an inside operation by the CSTO aimed at reinforcing the threatened government with a warning to not push them too far but not to fight them. The CSTO troops were not deployed to suppress demonstrations, but to ensure security of facilities and Kazakhstan security forces were deployed to restore order.

Even CSTO officials admitted that the deployment was political. Zas emphasized that for Kazakhstan "not only military aid, but, first of all, moral support is of principal importance" (TASS, 2022c). Yulia Nikitina pointed out that the political aspect of the operation was more significant than its military side (Eurasianet, 2022c). This separation indicates that the CSTO's institutional and political architecture is targeted at a limited mission set – to safeguard member regimes from internal threats, especially ones that are seen as being triggered from the outside. The alliance has consistently refused to get involved in inter-state conflicts among its members, such as Armenia's dispute with Azerbaijan, for fear of a clash with the other members of the alliance, Russia, and of exposing the alliance's claim to collective security.

The alliance has consistently opposed intervening in inter-state conflicts involving its members, particularly in Armenia's conflict with Azerbaijan, due to the risk of conflict with Russia's other members and the fear of it being exposed as a hollow promise of collective security.

6. CONCLUSION

Comparing NATO in Afghanistan and the CSTO in Kazakhstan, I conclude that institutional design (consensus rules, rapid reaction forces, collective defence clauses) is not enough to explain the behaviour of the allies. The important question is what is behind the distribution of power, and the norms on which cooperation is based. The CSTO's hegemonic dependency model results in fast and firm response to small crises that affect Russian interests or client regimes, but not in complex, multilateral operations and creates legitimacy crises for members that have other security interests. NATO's fuzzily defined burden-sharing leads to mission failure and chronic coordination problems and to free riding, but the shared democratic norms help maintain NATO's institutional legitimacy and prevent defection even when missions fail.

The findings indicate that for alliance theory the similarity of the formal institutions is a weak predictor of the convergence of behaviour. The CSTO's NATO-inspired organisational model has failed to generate NATO-style cooperation due to the high levels of asymmetries of power and differences in norms between the two organisations. The alliance is, in reality, a tool of Russian regional "hegemony" and not a real collective security community.

To the policymaker, the idea is that the CSTO's value to the Russian side is in its ability to intervene in a low-profile and cheap way and to give the impression of a legitimate multilateral effort when in reality it isn't. It is its weakness that is shared: the same source of weakness is that any alliance would be based on the participation of one member party, which cannot be used to effectively deter threats to other members of the alliance, as Armenia's experience shows. Armenia refused to participate in the readiness drills in Kazakhstan in September 2022, "essentially a mute protest against the bloc's failure to defend Armenia after it was attacked by Azerbaijan" (Eurasianet, 2022c). The future of CSTO will rely on whether Russia can continue to provide subsidies and security guarantees to keep it together and if small members determine it is better for them to belong to the CSTO than to other security alliances.

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