

Analysis

Russia's Approach to Multilateral Cooperation in the Post-Soviet Space: CSTO, EurAsEC and SCO

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Abstract

In the last decade, Russia has developed a more nuanced approach to multilateralism in the post-Soviet space. Having become disillusioned with the CIS, the Russian leadership has focussed on cooperation in specific fields with certain states in CSTO and EurAsEC, while SCO has provided scope for cooperation in tandem with China, another major power in Eurasia. Moscow has successfully managed to keep what it considers strategic areas of cooperation within CSTO and EurAsEC, thus not involving China in these areas, while at the same time benefiting from tying itself to the resources and international standing of China in SCO. This mixed approach has enabled Russia to reassert its place as the leader of multilateralism in parts of the post-Soviet space.

The Slow-Death of the CIS

The Russian Federation's approach to multilateral cooperation with former Soviet states has changed markedly in the last decade. During the 1990s, Russia promoted the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), seeking to position Moscow as the centre of the post-Soviet space. However, during the 1990s a number of member-states became disillusioned with the CIS. Eventually, even Russia came to consider the CIS as an ineffective mechanism for its aims, viewing a number of CIS states as actively disrupting the organization as a response to Russia's dominance. In addition, Moscow considered that it was subsidizing the CIS, without receiving due deference from the other states in return. As a result, since the end of the 1990s the CIS has faded into the periphery. At the most recent CIS summit in Chisinau in October 2009, only seven presidents of the former Soviet states attended, and the Russian authorities only confirmed Medvedev's attendance four days prior to the summit.

A New Strategy for Multilateralism in the Former Soviet Space: CSTO, EurAsEC and SCO

On coming to power, Putin identified the "near abroad" as a key priority. This trend was intensified during the 2000s, as relations with Europe, the US and certain former Soviet states deteriorated. This reemphasis in foreign policy priorities is illustrated by President Putin's and Medvedev's respective maiden foreign visits. In 2000, in a highly symbolic move, Putin's first overseas visit as president was to the UK, designed to convey Russia's interest in closer ties with Europe. By contrast, Medvedev's first foreign trip was to Astana, in which he emphasized Kazakhstan as a key partner.

Moscow has chosen to pursue a targeted strategy for increasing its influence in the "near abroad", which includes developing multilateral cooperation in a number of smaller regional organizations with those states most inclined to cooperate with Russia. In this way, Moscow considers that if it is bankrolling these organizations, it will be ensured of a high degree of influence over them. The two most notable regional organizations in this regard are the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC). The CSTO was created by formally institutionalizing the 1992 CIS Collective Security Treaty. Since 2004 EurAsEC has taken on many of the economic functions of the CIS, in particular the development of a Customs Union. In addition to these organizations with origins in the CIS, Russia has become increasingly involved in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which is a regional organization addressing security and economic cooperation in Central Asia. This organization is notable for China's membership and is the only organization in the post-Soviet space within which Russia has chosen to accept joint top-billing with another major external power.

Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)

The CSTO is made up of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. It focuses on traditional military cooperation, particularly the development of a common counter-terrorism force, military training exercises, the sale of military equipment and as a hub for the coordination of defence policies.

The CSTO has developed against the background of Ukrainian and Georgian interest in joining NATO,

which NATO itself has encouraged. As a result, the spectre of finding NATO on its border looms large in Russian foreign and security calculations. Indeed, Medvedev has stated that the CSTO Collective Operational Reaction Force (CORF) should be “adequate in size, effective, armed with the most modern weapons and must be on par with NATO forces”. This consideration has taken on even greater significance since the brief Russian-Georgian conflict over South Ossetia in 2008. Moscow is concerned that NATO could be successfully pulled into such a dispute by a regime unfavorable to Moscow, such as Saakashvili’s. In this context, the CSTO’s budget for 2009 was increased by 25%, and taking into account that Russia already contributes a disproportionate amount of the budget, it is likely Russia is providing most of these funds.

After a period of relative stagnation, the CSTO reached an agreement to establish CORF in February 2009. The current incarnation of the Force stems from efforts towards forming a Rapid Reaction Force in the mid-2000s. Under this agreement, a force of 16,000 troops is to be formed, with Russia supplying 8,000, Kazakhstan 4,000, Tajikistan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia 1,000 each. This structure reflects Russian dominance of the collective military component, which was also evident in previous “Rubezh” exercises that the countries carried out. In this way, CSTO serves as a mechanism to ingrain Russia as a vital military sponsor for its members. For example, in 2006 Russia reached an agreement with Kyrgyzstan to develop and expand its airbase in Kant, justifying this as a contribution to the CSTO. From Russia’s perspective, should a situation similar to the one of August 2008 arise, conducting military operations under the auspices of the CSTO would provide Russia with greater legitimacy, as well as practical support.

However, Russia’s overwhelming dominance of the CSTO is not universally welcomed by the other members. Certain members are reluctant to commit to a full-scale and permanent common military battalion under Russian control, which has delayed the CORF for several years. Uzbekistan has been particularly sceptical. Tashkent only joined the CSTO in 2005, and only as part of a larger turn towards Moscow following Western criticism over its repression of an uprising in Andijan in 2005. Uzbekistan has not yet ratified the CORF agreement, and shows no inclination to do so. It previously declined to send troops to joint CSTO military exercises, including the recent large-scale exercises “Interaction 2009”. Tashkent voices concerns about Russian dominance of the CSTO, citing

Russian intentions to establish a CSTO base in Osh (southern Kyrgyzstan, close to the Uzbek border), as a threat to Uzbekistan, and also suggesting that the purpose of CORF is to interfere in the internal affairs of other post-Soviet states. Additionally, Belarus initially refused to ratify the CORF, largely because of a political dispute with Moscow, but has now agreed to participate.

Russian dominance of the CSTO is a *fait accompli*. What is more uncertain is how much willingness there is to acquiesce to this amongst the other members. They are increasingly linking their participation with political concessions from Moscow on other issues.

Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC)

EurAsEC was established in 2001 by Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, having grown out of the failing CIS. In 2005, it simultaneously granted Uzbekistan membership and merged with the Central Asian Cooperation Organization. Uzbekistan subsequently announced a suspension of its membership in late 2008. The development of EurAsEC is, in part, the result of Russian desires to ensure it remains an important economic partner of the Central Asia countries, in the context of growing American and Chinese presence in this region.

In recent years, EurAsEC has taken up the challenge of reinvigorating multilateral economic cooperation in the post-Soviet space, in particular forming a Customs Union. From 1 January 2010, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia introduced a single customs tariff to be regulated by a Commission of the Customs Union, and a single customs territory will be formed on 1 July 2010. This is a major success for Russia, binding two of the stronger post-Soviet economies into a Moscow-centred economic zone.

EurAsEC’s concentration on this three-state Customs Union is one of the reasons for Tashkent’s decision to suspend its membership, as it considers the other members were ignored, in spite of EurAsEC claims that it expects them to join at a later date. The narrow focus on three countries is an expression of Moscow’s new pragmatic attitude to multilateralism, whereby it is unwilling to bankroll cooperative mechanisms without receiving something substantive for doing so.

At an extraordinary summit in Moscow in February 2009, EurAsEC members agreed to establish a Joint Anti-Financial Crisis Fund to be administered by the Eurasian Development Bank. Russia is expected to contribute \$7.5 billion of a total \$10 billion. Indeed, the Russian Finance Ministry argues that Russia’s contribution to EurAsEC represents its efforts to combat the fi-

nancial crisis within a global coalition. However, several analysts interpret this contribution as aimed at buying influence in these states. Indeed, at the summit, Russia openly discussed bilateral financial assistance packages with individual members, including a \$2 billion loan to Kyrgyzstan, \$2 billion credit to Belarus and \$500 million to Armenia. This blurring of the lines between Russia's bilateral and multilateral strategy in EurAsEC emphasizes the strong influence Russia wields within the organization.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

The Shanghai mechanism was created in the early 1990's in order to facilitate the settlement of border issues between China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with the involvement of Russia. From this limited framework, the scope of cooperation grew, firstly into the Shanghai 5 mechanism, and then in 2001 into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), with Uzbekistan joining the grouping. The SCO's remit has now been expanded significantly, and covers predominantly non-traditional security, as well as increasing economic, cultural and humanitarian collaboration.

The SCO represents a different phenomenon in Russia's multilateralism in the post-Soviet space. In contrast to CSTO and EurAsEC, the involvement of another large extra-regional actor alters the dynamics significantly. Although its policy towards SCO is influenced by its lack of dominance relative to CSTO and EurAsEC, Moscow has nonetheless embraced the SCO. By pursuing a more collaborative and compromising approach, Russia has achieved some notable successes for its interests.

The Russian leadership considers SCO to be an important element in its security policy, because it sees its own security as directly affected by the spread of terrorism, extremism, organized crime and illegal narcotics trafficking from Central Asia to Russia. Additionally Moscow also has an interest in supporting the prevailing regimes in the Central Asian countries. SCO is focussed on non-military solutions to regional security, and its agenda of tackling the "three evils" (terrorism, extremism, separatism), creating the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure and developing programmes against narcotics smuggling thus serve Moscow's priorities for the region well.

In addition, the Russian leadership has identified clear economic objectives for SCO. For example, at the 2006 SCO annual summit, Vladimir Putin proposed the creation of an SCO Energy Club. However, Russian ambitions for economic cooperation within

SCO are limited to certain sectors and predominately to large-scale infrastructure projects; it has sought to restrict any movement towards customs coordination. Instead, it appears that Russia prefers to develop micro-level economic coordination within the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), thus excluding China. Moscow fears that, given China's superior economic capacity, Russia would be relegated to the status of an irrelevant player in economic cooperation in the region.

SCO is also considered a valuable tool for asserting Russia's place in international affairs, building on rhetorical solidarity on diplomatic affairs within the Russian-Chinese relationship, based on "non-intervention in sovereign states' affairs" and advocating "a multipolar world". Indeed, the role of SCO as an alternative vision of international affairs has been further cultivated by Russia and China, by arranging the first BRIC summit (BRIC refers to Brazil, Russia, India and China). This acronym, drawn from a Goldman Sacks Report, has become popularized in reference to these states as rapidly growing economies, which will likely become global powers in the coming decades) to follow on from the completion of the SCO Annual Summit in 2009. In addition, SCO also points to the fact that Iran, India and Pakistan are official observer-states and thus SCO represents a substantial political voice within the international community.

A Web of Regional Organizations

Russia is involved in three regional organizations in the post-Soviet space with similar memberships and focus. However, in spite of the evident overlaps in function, the Russian regime considers each useful in fulfilling a distinct element of its multilateral agenda. As a result, Russia continues to invest resources and political will into each of them. Although this may not be the most effective strategy, the current formula enables Moscow to achieve certain aims without sacrificing interests it holds dear. CSTO and SCO both seek to enhance regional security, but there is a divergence in their approaches and aims in this regard. CSTO is focussed on more traditional military coordination, while SCO is aimed at harmonizing approaches to non-traditional security challenges. EurAsEC and SCO both seek to foster economic coordination, but EurAsEC is focussed on micro-level customs coordination, while SCO is currently centred on large-scale projects and energy cooperation.

This split in functions allows Russia to keep certain "strategic" areas of multilateral coordination with-

in frameworks it has strong control over. Moscow is wary of SCO developing into a format within which it will, over time, lose influence in Central Asia to China. Therefore, it promotes CSTO and EurAsEC as a way of safeguarding its influential position in these states' military and economic trade policy. This dual-track system enables Russia to cooperate with China in a regional framework with greater resources and international clout, but also to fall back on alternatives for areas it considers sensitive.

Conclusion

Bilateral ties still remain the most important aspect of Russia's relations with the post-Soviet space, but multilateral cooperation has become an increasingly significant component. Over the last decade, Russia has identified those former Soviet states that are willing to cooperate with Russia multilaterally within a format considered favorable by Moscow. With the creation of the CSTO and EurAsEC, Russia has developed a narrower CIS that is relatively more successful, and over which Russia has a predominant influence. The development of the CORF and a Customs Union represent significant achievements, although tempered by limited participation in both. Meanwhile, Russia's active involvement in SCO suggests at least a willingness to acquiesce

its desire for sole predominance, in favour of greater cooperation within the region. Therefore, Russia has developed a more limited but nuanced approach to multilateral cooperation in the post-Soviet space. The existing web of regional architecture is bloated and from some perspectives inefficient, but it has enabled Russia to reassert its influence over targeted sections of the post-Soviet space, while at the same time safeguarding itself from over-committing financially to this aim.

On 5-6th April, protests in Kyrgyzstan forced the prevailing President, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, to flee the capital, Bishkek, and led to the formation of a temporary government of opposition leaders, headed by Roza Otunbayeva. The role of the CSTO, EurAsEC and SCO in the Kyrgyz crisis appears to be minimal, with each standing back, declaring it an internal Kyrgyz affair and offering their support for the earliest peaceful resolution of the situation. In addition, the CSTO has been involved in meetings with the UN and OCSE about brokering a solution to the political instability.

Whichever way the crisis plays out, it is unlikely to alter Bishkek's commitment to CSTO, EurAsEC or SCO. Indeed, the temporary government has already publicly reassured the CSTO about the status of its Kant airbase in Kyrgyzstan.

About the Author

Stephen Aris is a Senior Researcher at the Centre for Security Studies, ETH Zurich. He is currently working on a book manuscript on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Recommended Reading

Elena Wilson Rowe and Stina Torjesen (eds.), *The multilateral dimension in Russian foreign policy*, London; New York: Routledge, 2009.

Stephen Aris, "Tackling the three evils: Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) – A regional response to non-traditional security challenges or an anti-Western bloc?", *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 5, 2009.