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Research article

From Almaty to Minsk: When Does the Collective Security Treaty Organization Intervene?

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Abstract
This study investigates how the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) intervenes militarily in the affairs of member states. Through comparative case study and process-tracing methodology, cases of non-intervention including Kyrgyzstan, 2005, 2010, 2020; Armenia, 2021; Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan, 2021–2; and Kursk, 2024 are compared to a single intervention that occurred in Kazakhstan, 2022. The analysis reveals that interventions are highly selective and not strictly driven by key provisions of the organisation's charter. The CSTO acts when domestic instability jeopardises a member regime's survival, specifically when the state's coercive apparatus loses reliability or control over its monopoly of violence. State breakdown within a CSTO member can create strategic risks for Moscow because the erosion of regime control over coercive institutions opens space for alternative political forces to seize power which may not be aligned with the regional hegemon's interests. The anticipation of a non-aligned government emerging from state breakdown induces the CSTO to strategically interpret member state instability through the potentiality of domestic collapse and future strategic realignment. Hence, preventing the rise of hostile regimes is a core factor behind intervention.

Keywords: *Collective Security Treaty Organization, protest, military intervention, authoritarian regionalism, repression*

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Introduction

Founded in 2002, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) once took a passive and vague stance on regional security policies, but in recent years, the organisation has become involved in coup-proofing and direct troop-led intervention into member states' internal affairs. Early on in the organisation's history, Weinstein (2007) highlighted the evolutionary nature of the CSTO and pinpointed its genesis in early Russian-inspired security agreements. These agreements took on the role of combating terrorism and extremism in the early 2000s. Weinstein noted that although unlikely, it could be possible that the alliance may result in the formation of a 'full-fledged military alliance – a postmodern Warsaw Pact that could help Russia fully realise its aspiration for leadership of the post-Soviet space' (Weinstein 2007: 168). Two decades removed, the CSTO has not become a new Warsaw Pact and interestingly enough, with great attention being cast on the Russia-Ukraine war, the nature of CSTO intervention remains poorly understood.

Scholars have acknowledged that since its formation, the CSTO has taken on roles that are evolutionary (Weinstein 2007; Bordyuzha 2011), while others have already conceptualised what a potential NATO clash with the CSTO would look like (Guliyev & Gawrich 2021), and have likewise weighed the organisation's effectiveness (Davidzon 2022). Zhirukhina (2023) argues that Russia views the CSTO as an instrument that can ensure collective security throughout the post-Soviet space and that over time, the organisation appears to have accumulated means to mitigate regional challenges. De Haas (2017) identifies similarities and differences between the CSTO and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), while others have begun to assess the utility of the organisation's peacekeeping operation potential (Kornilenko 2020). MacHaffie (2024) recently highlighted the organisation's strategic ambiguity, while Nasibov (2025) pointed attention towards the organisation's collective signalling function (by measuring joint statement frequencies) and demonstrated how signalling and joint statements and declarations contribute to reinforcing regime stability in member states. Collective signalling, argues Nasibov, is a performative mechanism of authoritarian regionalism and enhances the credibility of incumbent regimes and elite cohesion. Cross-border wars and clashes, parliamentary elections as well as protests all are significantly correlated with CSTO joint statements, and Kyrgyzstan and Belarus are the most active participants in joint declarations.

When it comes to intervention and the direct deployment of troops, for the CSTO to intervene, it requires a formal invocation of aggression under its charter along with 1) a consensus among member states; 2) the host government's request for assistance; 3) an absence of objections from any member whose interests might be directly affected by intervention. The CSTO's operational basis thus

appears to be contingent on political unanimity and internal cohesion among allies. This study asks what conditions CSTO troops are likely to intervene under? Thus far, scholarship on the CSTO has been heavily focused on its institutional evolutionary development. On one hand, this is somewhat surprising given the relevance of this alliance for contemporary geopolitical struggles and conflicts that are ongoing in Eastern Europe (and elsewhere), but on the other hand, very little has been written about the interventional nature of this organisation when it comes to actual deployment of its troops. The way that the organisation has thus far interpreted a key Article (4) of the Collective Security Treaty (CST) has ranged from being either deliberately incompatible to vaguely erratic. Because of these inconsistencies, we still do not know when and why the CSTO has intervened in member states' political affairs. To address this gap in knowledge, the present study carries out a comparative analysis of the CSTO and numerous political instability events. The research design of this study is based on comparative case study methodology and process tracing (George & Bennett 2005), wherein cases featuring the presence of the outcome (intervention) are compared to cases that did not result in the outcome (no intervention).

Sequences found in episodes of political and territorial instability are given attention. Comparative analyses are first carried out on non-interventions which include Kyrgyzstan, 2005, 2010 and 2020; Armenia, 2021; Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan, 2021–2; and Kursk, 2024. These are then contrasted to interventions in an anti-governmental wave of dissent that occurred in Kazakhstan, 2022. Findings reveal that the CSTO tends to intervene only when a member state's internal security structures are compromised or become unreliable – entailing risk of state breakdown. State breakdown within a CSTO member can create strategic risks for Moscow because the erosion of regime control over coercive institutions opens up space for alternative political forces to seize power. The latter is especially poignant in relation to political and ideological forces that are not aligned with Russian regional interests. This indicates that there is a highly selective nature of CSTO interventions which are not strictly bound by key points in the organisation's charter. Specifically, the CSTO has only carried out one direct deployment of troops which indicates that it intervenes when internal instability threatens member state regime survival rather than in cases involving external threats or border disputes.

The order of this study is as follows. I first review literature on the historical contexts upon which the CSTO was formed. Emphasis is placed on the Warsaw Pact (WP) and different dynamics including the historical makeup of this entity in relation to the CSTO, organisational capacities, coup-proofing as well as counterbalancing strategies. Subsequently, a research design section is put forward to explain the comparative methodology that is utilised in this study and how the outcome of intervention is operationalised. This is followed by empirical analysis

which begins first with non-interventions and then shifts to intervention. The final sections include a discussion surrounding the implications of this inquiry with relation to scholarship on illiberal regionalism and a conclusion that summarises the findings of the study and its limitations.

Historical backdrop

Any inquiry into the CSTO has to be considerate of the antecedent military alliance that came before it. Throughout most of the Cold War, the Warsaw Pact dictated political affairs in its member states. In its 36-year existence, numerous turbulent events arose within the Soviet sphere of influence and the most significant of these incidents included attempted revolutions that were aimed at overthrowing domestic communist political elites. Members of the WP included Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania and the Soviet Union (Albania and Romania later became politically misaligned with the Soviet Union). In 1953, domestic disturbances arose in different parts of Eastern Europe – most notably, challenges were posed towards incumbent governments and communist and socialist political affairs. Soviet troops intervened through the use of mechanised military equipment, most notably tanks in cases such as the GDR in 1953 or Hungary in 1956. Subsequently, Warsaw Pact allied troops intervened in the Prague Spring, 1968. Soviet-led intervention across this military alliance featured particular policies and strategies that sought to upkeep socialist ideology throughout state institutions via counterbalancing, coup-proofing along with a range of other security measures. This had a direct impact on prospects for collective action and the costs of waging a potential revolution up until the emergence of M. Gorbachev and his abandonment of the former 'Brezhnev Doctrine', which entailed the USSR, via the Warsaw Pact, intervening in member states militarily if incumbent communist political status quos were threatened (Anisin 2020). Scholars have assessed the characteristics of the Warsaw Pact along with civil-military relations (Kramer 1984; Barany 1993), the overarching role of WP-led intervention (Jones 1980; Bluth 2004; Muehlenbeck & Telepneva 2019) and the Brezhnev doctrine (Loth 2001). The attention has been given to the behaviour of allies within the WP (Nelson 2019), to specific crises and political dissent at different points in time of the Warsaw Pact including incidents of mutiny (Rosen 1985), the Polish crisis of 1956 (Machcewicz 1995; Persak 2013), resistance throughout the GDR (Pfaff 2001), the Hungarian attempted revolution of 1956 (Mark & Apor 2015; McCabe 2019), the Prague Spring, 1968 (Sur 2006; Stolarik 2010), the internal political clash with Romania (Alexiev 1981), the Polish Solidarity movement (Paczkowski & Byrne 2007), anti-nuclear protests (Żuk 2017) and to the collapse of communism in Europe that began in 1989 (Ash 2014; Anisin 2020). Although many would consider the Warsaw Pact to be a relic of Cold War history, the contemporary CSTO has roots in the Warsaw Pact, although the

organisation operates on a smaller scale and has much less political power. The CSTO, as this study will reveal, also has responded to political stability across the domestic contexts of its member states.

As described by Anisin (2020), Moscow functioned as an exogenous principal in relation to Warsaw Pact member states' domestic security forces. Its response to revolutionary upheavals was swift and brutal – tanks, soldiers and armoured vehicles were brought in to occupy physically strategic areas in a member state and security organs directly intervened in state institutions to ensure allegiance to socialist values. However, once the Berlin Wall collapsed, the Soviet Union lost its first ally. Dissent then spread like wildfire throughout the rest of the Warsaw Pact states leading to the fall of communist governments throughout Europe and eventually the dissolution of the USSR (Beissinger 2009). As territorial disintegration, pro-democratic national revolutions and ethnic conflicts spread throughout the entire perimeter of the Soviet Union, an absence of political will by the Soviet Politburo along with the fast-paced disintegration of the WP resulted in NATO declaring that the WP was no longer an enemy in July of 1990. In November of that year, NATO and the WP signed the CFE Treaty which formalised the end of the Cold War. The WP was subsequently dissolved in July 1991 (Mastny & Byrne 2005).

The Collective Security Treaty Organization

After the WP was dissolved, a new organisation gradually replaced some of its security mechanisms when it came to dealing with post-Soviet political geopolitical affairs. The CSTO was established on 7 October 2002, and has a genesis in earlier agreements which included the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the 1992 Collective Security Treaty (Weinstein 2007: 168). Members of the CSTO include Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan was also a member up until 2012, when a disagreement arose surrounding its hosting of a US military base to facilitate troop withdrawal from Afghanistan (Guliyev & Garwich 2021: 9). The aims of the CSTO 'are to strengthen peace and international and regional security and stability, and to defend on a collective basis the independence, territorial integrity, and sovereignty of member states' (Guliyev & Garwich 2021: 9). Currently, the CSTO has observer status in the UN General Assembly and the organisation also signed a Joint Declaration on cooperation with the UN Secretariat back in 2010 (Guliyev & Garwich 2021). Further, Article 4 of the CSTO is similar to NATO's Article 5. It is about mutual defence among member countries and necessitates that if one member is attacked, all the other members will treat it as if they were attacked too – with the aim of collective protection of each member's land and sovereignty against external threats (Collective Security Treaty Organization 1992). Although the term 'attack' refers to armed aggression, it may also be interpreted as any

military action or invasion by an external force that threatens the sovereignty or security of a member country. When an attack occurs, upon the request of the affected member state other member states are beholden to provide instant assistance ranging from military support to other forms of aid and resources. These collective defence actions are carried by the right to self-defence as observed in Article 51 of the United Nations Charter and member states must inform the United Nations Security Council of any measures taken under this provision. They also are required to comply with the provisions that are outlined in the UN Charter.

As subsequent sections will reveal, 'attacks' on sovereignty can come internally from the populace of a given member state and the most threatening attacks thus far have appeared to have been driven by civilian-based collective action against the political status quo. Indeed, the geostrategic configuration under which the CSTO was established was much more different than that of the Warsaw Pact. After the Soviet collapse, bipolarity became absent in the international system and the previous hegemon, Russia, had experienced a decade of economic, political and social strife – numerous conflicts (including two Chechen wars) resulted in significant hardships for its armed forces. At this point in time, the topic of national sovereignty of former states formed key policy preferences of incumbent governments which inevitably retracted power away from the CIS and the 1992 security treaty. Ethnic conflicts led to a decade that was marked by a lack of cooperation between Russia and countries that were former Soviet republics. In the early 2000s, CSTO members started to address the following issues: environmental security, drug trade, human trafficking and organised crime (Weinstein 2007: 174). Article 8 was particularly important as it enabled states to coordinate and unite efforts to fight against international terrorism and transnational crime in a time period when discourses on the 'war' on terror were salient. For example, on 14 June 2009, the organisation approved a plan for its member states to combat illegal migration via coordination mechanisms between security authorities in each state (Bordyuzha 2011: 344). Subsequent security policies were crafted in the spheres of information technology security and emergency responses to both natural and man-made situations (Bordyuzha 2011: 346). Kropatcheva (2016) highlights the complexity in how Russia has exercised power with relation to CSTO policy and argues that it uses the organisation to pursue unilateral ambitions, which in turn, has fostered 'instrumental multilateralism' within the CSTO. Priority in achieving these ends is given to what Bordyuzha plausibly contends to be political means (Bordyuzha 2011: 339). Along similar lines, both non-members of the CSTO – Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan – have bilateral agreements with Russia that cover strategic partnership and military cooperation; and over time, Russia has sought to enhance the organisation's military capabilities across Central Asia (Zhirukhina 2023).

This brings us to a salient factor of peacekeeping which clearly sets the CSTO apart from the Warsaw Pact. The CSTO created a peacekeeping mechanism in

2004, and since then, the reach of peacekeeping operations has remained quite vague. Nevertheless, peacekeeping is clearly an emulation of the UN PKOs and evolving global norms surrounding conflict prevention. The CSTO peacekeeping function was meant to serve as an 'early warning system' that would aid conflict resolution in emerging conflicts. The usage of peacekeeping forces has been implemented only once thus far, during political instability in Kazakhstan (Zhirukhina 2023). The lack of usage of peacekeepers, however, does not mean that the CSTO has been absent from intervening in its member states' internal political affairs. In total, Zhirukhina (2023) estimates that the organisation's peacekeeping troop numbers are around 3,000 military personnel and 600 law enforcement personnel. More significantly, the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces have 20,000 troops. In recent years, increases in military drills and training have been observed in the CSTO such as the 'Cobalt-2021' exercises which were held in Tajikistan (along with Echelon-2021; Search-2021; Interaction-2021) (CSTO 2021).

Similar to the WP, Russia is the principal decision maker within the CSTO, which is also why some, such as Weitz (2018), have argued that the CSTO enables Russia to carry out its foreign policy preferences at an economic advantage and through selling arms at profitable prices. Guliyev and Garwich (2021) demonstrate that the CSTO had a lack of involvement in secessionist conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh (NK), Abkhazia/South Ossetia in Georgia and Crimea/Eastern Ukraine. The authors contend that passivity is a sign of weak organisational capacity and a weak Russian hegemony (Guliyev & Garwich 2021: 16). The CSTO, argue the authors, is a weak international organisation when compared to NATO. Conceptually, we must consider that both the Warsaw Pact and CSTO, respectfully, are situated in comparatively distinct periods of history and may not have any direct analogous comparative allegiances. The WP exerted great power not only because of its highly militarised nature, but also because the principal decision maker (the Soviet Union) functioned through a war mobilisation economy. This type of economic setup was completely different from anything that can be observed today. In contrast, the CSTO is dominated by a weaker Russian Federation that currently only has a fraction of the economic and military power that the Soviet Union had. The geopolitical configurations that dominated the period of the Cold War during the Warsaw Pact and those that have been present (and evolving) since 2002 are also markedly different. The threat of a clash between Russia and NATO is no longer bound to the theatre of Central Europe, but is now on the border of Russia and former Soviet territories along with Finland. At the time of writing this study, the conditions that surround CSTO intervention remain unclear, and scholars have yet to identify the key variables that are associated with the organisation's deployment of troops.

Research design

The methodological logic driving case selection in this study is premised on examining cases in which the deployment and intervention of CSTO troops or agents occurred versus those in which it did not. In other words, attention is given to a set of cases that arose in contexts where it directly intervened in member states' political affairs overtly. Overt operations feature direct usage of CSTO troops. This outcome is treated as intervention which contrasts with non-intervention. With the latter, a given instance of political or territorial instability may have arisen in a member state of the CSTO, but the organisation did not respond. CSTO intervention in member states' domestic political crises is operationalised dichotomously – intervention captures instances where CSTO troops or agents are deployed. Non-intervention captures cases where similar instability unfolded without CSTO deployment. Focus is placed on the organisation's behavioural response to comparable threats across cases (George & Bennett 2005). The methodological approach will draw on structured and focused comparisons as well as process-tracing. Specifically, the structured and focused comparison tool can be used to engage in cross-case analysis and involves posing a set of standardised questions to each case and, in turn, this enables researchers to observe consistency across a sample of cases as well as deviations. Likewise, case studies that are based on structured and focused comparisons enable us to identify insights into potential causal mechanisms that are empirically salient across different contexts.

George and Bennett noted that 'the method of structured, focused comparison requires that the researcher ask the same set of questions of each case under study in order to generate comparable data' (George & Bennett 2005: 67). By applying this method to the cases in which the CSTO did not intervene (non-intervention) to those in which it did, this study will implement a constant analytical framework across varying contexts within the CSTO's sphere of influence. Events of interest that went into case inclusion (and non-inclusion) range from instances of political instability induced by protest and dissent, ethnic clashes, border disputes and incursions of foreign armies. Cases of non-intervention include: Kyrgyzstan, 2005, 2010; 2020; Armenia, 2021, Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan, 2021–2 and Kursk, 2024. Cases of intervention include Kazakhstan, 2022. This comparative approach equates to a most-similar systems design in which cases are broadly comparable along structural dimensions. Each case features a state that has membership in the CSTO, a post-Soviet legacy and similar shared institutional architecture. By maximising contextual similarity and concurrently allowing the outcome variable to vary, such an approach enables me to isolate conditions that distinguish intervention from non-intervention. Furthermore, process-tracing is utilised to identify the chain of events that led to the CSTO intervening. This methodological tool involves 'the systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analyzed in light of

research questions and hypotheses posed by the investigator' (George & Bennett 2005: 205).

Through process-tracing, I investigate key instances of decision-making in each case and contrast sequences of events in cases where intervention occurred to those in which it did not. This is done attuned to the presence or absence of four core conditions which include protest activity (mobilisation that threatens the head of state), ethnic conflict, foreign military intrusion as well as security force reliability. Each condition captures characteristics of instability dynamics relevant to CSTO intervention. These variables are used to compare how different configurations of factors impact the CSTO's decision to intervene or remain passive. In terms of case inclusion, readers may wonder why certain cases have been included in this study while others were not. For example, when it comes to the Ukrainian Armed Forces' incursion into Russian territory (the Kursk oblast in August of 2024), this case has been included in the sample because it constitutes a direct empirical example of the CSTO's Article 4 – wherein an external force enters onto the territory of a member state and threatens its territorial integrity. Recall that Article 4 is premised on the potential threat of an 'attack' that typically constitutes armed aggression or military action by an external force that endangers the sovereignty or security of a member country. In July 2021, there was also an incursion of a foreign country's armed forces into a member state's territory during a border incident which involved Azerbaijani forces going into Armenian territory. The primary objective of this study is not to develop a comprehensive theory of intervention, but it does nevertheless rely on a conceptual account of this phenomenon in order to explain why the CSTO acted in certain cases and not in others. Bull's (1984) framework of intervention is useful here as it implied that intervention is an act in which one political authority intrudes into the internal affairs of another (and typically, this is justified or exercised by the more powerful actor). As such, CSTO actions can be viewed as a form of hierarchical intervention within a regional security community that is dominated by the Russian Federation. It is plausible to assume that CSTO deployments empirically operate somewhere between the poles of collective defence and hegemonic stabilisation, and even though interventions are formally multilateral, they are often driven by asymmetric capacities attuned to Russia's political and military leverage. As such, CSTO interventions comprise legal and political actions that are driven by its dominant members in order to preserve internal order and regional alignment. From this, it is possible to hypothesise that interventions occur where power asymmetry coincides with perceived threats to regime stability. Vice versa, comparable cases and crises without such alignment are likelier to result in non-intervention.

Empirical Analysis

This inquiry starts by focusing on instances of political instability and crises that arose but did not result in or bring about a CSTO response of troop deployment.

Specifically, cases that featured border disputes, ethnic clashes and military-based armed conflict are drawn on first. Subsequently, attention is placed on a case featuring intervention and deployment of troops along with an analysis of counter-example cases stemming from protest uprisings in 2005 and 2020 in Kyrgyzstan in which revolutionary uprisings occurred but the CSTO did not intervene. Each of the aforementioned conditions are listed in Table 1 in which the presence and absence of conditions are coded in each case beginning with 1) whether or not there were threatening active protests; 2) whether or not there were ethnic clashes either between ethnic groups within a member state or due to ethnic clashes with another member state's population; 3) whether or not there was an intrusion by a foreign non-member military power; 4) whether or not security forces were reliable or not.

Table 1: Characteristics of Interventions and Non-Interventions

Case	Protest	Ethnic Clashes	Foreign Non-Member Intrusion	Security force Uncertainty
Non-interventions				
2010 Southern Kyrgyzstan	No	Yes	No	No
2021 Armenia	No	Yes	Yes	No
2021–2 Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan	No	Yes	No	No
2024 Kursk	No	No	Yes	No
Interventions				
2020 Belarus	Yes	No	No	Yes
2022 Kazakhstan	Yes	No	No	Yes

Source: Author

Table 1 compares CSTO intervention and non-intervention and lists the presence or absence of four conditions. Across the six cases of non-intervention, at least one destabilising factor was present which was mass protests in Kyrgyzstan (2005, 2020), ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan (2010) and along the Tajik–Kyrgyz border (2021–22), as well as external incursions in Armenia (2021) and Russia's Kursk region (2024). However, none of these situations combined internal unrest with a loss of control over state coercive institutions. In contrast, in the sole case of intervention (2022 Kazakhstan), both large-scale protests and the breakdown of security force reliability occurred.

Southern Kyrgyzstan – 2010

Back in April 2010 in Kyrgyzstan, the Kurmanbek Bakiyev-led government collapsed after large-scale dissent which included numerous repressive episodes that brought about civilian fatalities. Following this, constitutional reform was carried

out, but Kyrgyz and Uzbek groups began to form informal security organisations and the government and police forces were largely ineffective in maintaining order. During this time ethnic rhetoric increased, with both Kyrgyz and Uzbek leaders using chauvinist messaging to mobilise support from their communities. The result was a rapid escalation of violence, as both sides viewed the other as a threat to their security and status. The lack of formal state intervention further contributed to the situation, allowing informal ethnic security groups to operate with impunity, ultimately leading to mass violence and displacement. Ethnic clashes ensued between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the south of the country. Roza Otunbaeva requested the CSTO's peacekeeping forces to be deployed to ease tension and prevent further ethnic clashes, but member states did not agree to this request and opted to provide material support instead.

This case illustrates how a political crisis ensued after the ousting of Kurmanbek Bakiyev, but instability did not prompt CSTO intervention. Ethnic clashes caused hundreds of fatalities and displaced many civilians. It is estimated that upwards of 400,000 ethnic Uzbeks were displaced from their homes and in turn many fled to neighbouring Uzbekistan for safety (BBC News 2010). Notably, Commercio (2018) contends that structural violence from the Soviet period fuelled these riots and political violence in 2010.

It was reported that Kyrgyz mobs carried out attacks on residents in Uzbek neighbourhoods of Osh and in Jalal-Abad. Meanwhile, Kyrgyzstan's interim government had significant problems in establishing a monopoly over violence. Ash (2022) argues that state weakness, coupled with chauvinist nationalist rhetoric, fostered support for interethnic violence. In carrying out a survey in Southern Kyrgyzstan, Ash tested whether individuals who trusted informal ethnic security providers were likelier to support violence when exposed to chauvinist rhetoric. The control group received a neutral message unrelated to ethnicity. Results revealed that the chauvinist message increased support for ethnic violence among respondents who trusted informal security providers – the perception of state weakness leads individuals to seek security from ethnic groups. Ash argues that in contexts where the state is weak and unable to provide security, ethnic groups can viably become alternative providers of protection and when combined with chauvinist rhetoric can lead to widespread support for violence.

As such, despite escalating violence and the Kyrgyz government's appeals for assistance, the CSTO did not intervene with troops. It only provided logistical support to Kyrgyz authorities which included supplying humanitarian aid and intelligence information for securing the Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan border. Likewise, representatives from the organisation also expedited discussions between the interim Kyrgyz government and other regional powers, but this response was perceived as inadequate. At the time and in the aftermath of violence, the CSTO's non-intervention led to calls for reform within the organisation. Many

analysts argued that the crisis exposed the organisation's weakness in addressing internal security threats.

Armenia – 2021

At the start of summer 2021, substantial political turmoil arose in Armenia when parliamentary elections were called after Armenia's military defeat in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. This military conflict brought about pervasive discontent with Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan who signed a ceasefire agreement that was interpreted by many as a concession of territorial control in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region. Elections in June 2021 were thus viewed as a snap referendum on his incumbency, yet surprisingly, Pashinyan's Civil Contract Party won in what turned out to be a crucial victory and a majority in parliament. High levels of socio-political polarisation ensued post-election and protests arose. By July 2021, incursions were carried out by Azerbaijani forces in Armenian territory throughout the pro vinces of Syunik and Gegharkunik – near the border between the two countries. Azerbaijan had attempted to justify these actions in claiming that its forces were adjusting positions in disputed territory. Interestingly enough, it drew from what were argued to be inaccuracies in Soviet-era maps that were used to delineate the border. In response, Armenia expectedly condemned these incursions and labelled them as illegal which was followed by increased military activity and preparedness. Estimates indicated that Azerbaijan had advanced up to 40 square kilometres (Broers 2021). These incursions were undoubtedly the most significant escalation since the ceasefire deal that was reached in November 2020 (led by Russia) to end the conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Strategically, the areas under attention are of importance for both sides – the Syunik region borders Iran and is a known passage for engaging in trade. Likewise, other areas were robust in relation to maintaining regional connectivity to commerce with Turkey. Furthermore, in attempting to deal with these incursions, the incumbent Armenian government sought out international support, but to no avail. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan even suggested that Russian border outposts should be set up along the length of Armenia's border (Reuters 2021). The CSTO was not drawn upon and remained inactive. At the time, CSTO Secretary-General Stanislav Zas stated that Azerbaijani troops entering into Armenian regions do not fall under the CSTO charter on collective defence, specifically that 'we must understand that the potential of the CSTO is activated only in the event of aggression or attack. Here we are dealing, in fact, with a border incident' (Dovich 2021). Numerous Armenian politicians criticised both Zas and the CSTO more broadly for their lack of action in both 2020 and 2021.

Three years later, in the summer of 2024, Armenia formally initiated discussions of attempting to leave the CSTO – it suspended participation in the organisation's summits and cancelled joint military exercises. What's more, Armenian officials

also accused Russian peacekeepers who were deployed in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2022 and thereafter of failing to prevent Azerbaijan's offensive (Bellamy 2024). Armenia's decision to join the International Criminal Court also angered Russia and has hitherto been interpreted by many as a 'pivot' towards the West. In terms of the non-intervention of the CSTO, we can observe how the organisation interpreted these events as being largely 'domestic' in their nature – two former Soviet republics in conflict with one another and as disputes that were not factually applicable to the charters of the organisation. As state breakdown did not occur, non-aligned political groups did not emerge to fundamentally change the course of events. There was no significant power vacuum nor were state institutions threatened to be taken over by opposition movements or nationalist factions to potentially reorient the country. If such nonaligned groups did emerge in 2021, they could have potentially sparked a CSTO intervention. Or an outcome such as the suspension of Uzbekistan in 2012 from the organisation may have ensued. Paradoxically, as of 2025, Armenia froze its membership in the CSTO (and may leave the organisation in 2026).

Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan border clashes (2021–2)

Similar to the aforementioned Armenian case, in April 2021, clashes also erupted along a disputed border of not only two former Soviet republics, but also between two CSTO members – Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Dozens of fatalities occurred on both sides. McGlinchey (2021) accurately summarises this outbreak in conflict as a complex mixture of failed resource management, unclear borders, illicit trade as well as nationalism. It is estimated that the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan spans more than 974 kilometres, but only 504 kilometres are marked (CPAB 2024).

This conflict was sparked by a lack of water and adverse water infrastructure policies in the Fergana Valley (an area of substantial population density). The Golovnoi water intake facility is used to control processes of distribution of water from the Ak Suu and Isfara Rivers to populations in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. For years, this particular centre has functioned as a focal point of contention. Tensions escalated in April 2021 as both countries made competing claims over the facility – each was accusing the other of trying to take control of strategic resources. Here, borders that were drawn during the Soviet era were, up until the outbreak of the conflict, disputed. Over several days, dozens of civilians, armed combatants and soldiers died as a result of violent exchanges. Indeed, from the outside looking in, one can easily observe how, throughout the Fergana Valley, historical competition between different groups has been salient and has contributed to socio-political instability. Yet, there are other important dynamics at play in this context. As noted by Sogojeva (2022), the presence of the Russian Armed Forces in Tajikistan has remained consistent since the dissolution

of the Soviet Union. In December 1992, Russian troops were involved in combat in Dushanbe and played a role fighting anti-government insurgents during the course of the Tajik civil war.

Currently, the presence of the Russian military (estimated at 7,000 troops) is on track to continue until 2042 (Sogojeva 2022). The Tajik military, in contrast, has fewer than 10,000 active soldiers and was only created in 1993. Along similar lines, Tajikistan's economy is reliant on remittances from Russia – approximations indicate that back in 2008, 44% of Tajikistan's GDP was reliant on remittances and this number dropped to only 30% by 2015 (Sogojeva 2022). Although the CSTO was active in attempting to ease tensions between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, it had a very limited response, did not send troops and its lack of action was interpreted by many as a salient sign of organisational weakness. McGlinchey makes a plausible set of claims by noting that this particular outbreak in conflict symbolised the fragility of peace in post-Soviet Central Asia and an overarching difficulty of maintaining regional stability in the CSTO. Violence exacerbated existing problems that stemmed from rent-seeking, illicit trade and what many consider to be a contraband economy. Finally, both Kyrgyz and Tajik leaders attempted to use the conflict to strengthen their own political and ideological platforms – nationalist rhetoric significantly increased until an agreement was made to de-escalate the situation.

Conflict re-arose in September of 2022 when Tajik troops entered Kyrgyzstan with the help of tanks and armoured personnel carriers. Tajik forces also used mortars to shoot at Kyrgyz villages and airfields near the Batken area. Upwards of 140,000 inhabitants were evacuated from the Batken and Osh regions. By this point in time, Russian President Putin urged the leaders of both states to resolve the situation peacefully and diplomatically. The CSTO sent diplomatic representatives and observers to the conflict area to mediate, although the end outcome of mediation was temporally constricted.

As argued by Castillo (2023):

> Conflicts in Ukraine, Karabakh, and along the Kyrgyz-Tajik border all demonstrate a number of vulnerabilities in the CSTO. Most crucially, the organization relies on Russia's role as a leader, mediator, and security guarantor, when it is no longer clear whether Russia is willing or able to live up to these roles.

Into late 2023, as a result of a lack of cohesion within the CSTO, Bishkek and Dushanbe actively pursued a local arms race – both neighbouring countries expanded their arsenals with advanced weaponry. Kyrgyzstan acquired Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones. Meanwhile, in 2022, Iran established a drone manufacturing facility in Tajikistan giving it access to Ababil-2 drones. Belarus also emerged

as a key military supplier to Kyrgyzstan, but has not given analogous support to Tajikistan (Castillo 2023).

Kursk – 2024

The final case of non-intervention happened quite recently and is still a part of an ongoing military conflict. In early August 2024, the Ukrainian Armed Forces sent several brigades comprised of upwards of 10,000 soldiers into the Kursk region of Russia. This incursion marked the first territorial invasion of Russia since WWII and caught many by surprise. Although still quite recent, many believe that this offensive was implemented in an attempt to disrupt Russian military operations in Donbas by forcing Russia to divert its troops from the East to slow down a long stemming offensive. There also were other strategic considerations discussed in public and media discourse – ranging from Ukraine being able to potentially take over a large nuclear power station in the Kursk Oblast to even possibly capturing the city of Kursk itself. Along with the military logic inherent to this incursion and its associated operation, there was also a clear political logic – in light of potential faltering Western support for Ukraine, the incursion aimed to increase confidence in Western powers' support for the Ukrainian Armed Forces and at the same time hypothetically increase the bargaining position of Ukraine in a potential negotiated settlement.

The first month of this incursion led to heavy conflict in the Kursk Oblast, but the incursion did not force Russia to divert any of its troops from the main portion of the front in the East. This is significant as it was reported that in just the first seven days, Ukrainian forces claimed to have seized 1,000 square kilometres of Russian territory. By 15 August, Ukraine had established military administrative units to govern the territories it controlled within the Kursk Oblast. For our purposes, the critical aspect of this incursion is that it did not spark a CSTO troop intervention, even though it was arguably the most significant instability incident induced via territorial incursion in any CSTO member states' history in the organisation. Article 4 of the CST defines aggression as an armed attack that threatens a member state's safety, stability, territorial integrity or sovereignty – such an attack is, according to the CST, supposed to be regarded by all other member states as an act of aggression against the entire treaty alliance. The attack by the Ukrainian Armed Forces on Kursk surely constituted all of the right conditions that would fulfil Article 4's requirements, yet Russia did not call on or bring CSTO troops in to help. In late 2024, it was reported that North Korea sent troops to aid Russia in Kursk, which made this conflict more internationalised in nature.

Interestingly enough, Russian officials sought to calm things down, rhetorically, by putting out arguments that the CSTO was not needed in this situation and, what's more, the incursion into Kursk was framed as a terrorist attack by an

adversary and thus officials argued it warranted a counter-terrorism operation. For example, on 9 August the first deputy chairman of the Russian State Duma's Committee on CIS Affairs (Konstantin Zatulin) argued that Russia had no plans to seek assistance from CSTO partners in response to the incursion and noted that Russia, as the dominant power in the CSTO, does not require outside help to defend its own territory. Around this time, relevant actors in the blogosphere were questioning the entire value of the CSTO and some were arguing that despite Russia's investment in the alliance's development, the country would not turn to its partners for support (Institute for the Study of War 2024). Ultimately, the Kursk case reveals that Article 4 of the CSTO is not actually interpreted to its intent. If the actual security structures underlying a given polity of a member state are not threatened, then the CSTO does not intervene.

Interventions

In contrast to the previously-mentioned cases of non-intervention, this section will delve into an instance in which the CSTO did intervene. This case illustrates how the organisation engages in a selective approach to intervention as it deploys troops when regime survival is threatened. The process that unfolded during this intervention can be categorised as follows: initial onset of instability → erosion of a member state's coercive control → CSTO's internal deliberation and decision-making → intervention outcome. Empirically, as instability ascends inside a given member state, it impacts regime control over coercive institutions (security services, armed forces, ministry of interior troops, police, etc.). In turn, member governments and CSTO leadership interpret and respond to that situation attuned to the degree of erosion of coercive control in the member state and the makeup of opposition groups who seek to overtake it. This is particularly why the CSTO did not intervene during large-scale protests that arose in the summer of 2020 in Belarus, where domestic security forces were not fragmented and repressed opposition through mass arrests.

Kazakhstan – January 2022

Kazakhstan maintained a comparatively long period of political stability under the Nazarbayev regime until a significant economic dislocation arose in 2022. Although Nazarbayev himself no longer held office, widespread public unrest erupted against the incumbent authorities after the government decided to discontinue its subsidies for liquefied natural gas at the tail end of 2021. In the span of a few days, prices significantly increased which caused uproar among the population. At first, dissent arose in Zhanaozen (a city of around 80,000 inhabitants in the West), and then spread to Almaty. Protesters then turned their grievances into general anti-governmental demands which led to the formation of a regime change-seeking movement. Between 2 and 11 January 2022, a rapid

sequence of events unfolded that marked one of the more volatile political periods in Kazakhstan's recent history. The end outcomes of the protests were quite transformative – not only did CSTO forces intervene in the internal affairs of a member state for the first time in its 20-year history, but the defence minister (Murat Bektanov) was removed, as was the prime minister (Askar Mamin) along with his government, and former leader Nazarbayev was removed from his chairman position in the country's Security Council. Likewise, the price of fuel was lowered back to an acceptable level (to protesters) and was capped for half a year.

President Tokayev threatened to 'liquidate' protesters (Kriener & Brassat 2023). Hundreds were killed as a result. Protesters used dispersed strategies ranging from marches to occupations, rioting and some even took up arms and engaged in firefights with security forces in Almaty. The government enabled its security organs and forces to use deadly force. The Kazakh incumbent leader directly ordered security forces and police to shoot at protesters. In one of his justifications for issuing this order, he noted that terrorists were damaging property, and that orders were given to shoot at them (Deutsche Welle 2022a). Furthermore, the CSTO was sent in when protesters began to gain the upper hand over security forces and police. Protesters seized the Almaty city hall and set it on fire. On 5 January 2022 protesters successfully took over Almaty airport which is a major international transit hub. Tokayev claimed that 'terrorist' activists and gangs had seized large infrastructure facilities at the airport and took over five planes (Deutsche Welle 2022b). This led Tokayev to call on the CSTO. Specifically, Article 4 of the Collective Security Treaty was drawn upon which was the first implementation of this Article in the history of the organisation (Kriener & Brassat 2023: 277). The response was granted, and an estimated 2,500 troops were sent, which Kriener and Brassat (2023) describe as being from Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan – with the majority being Russian. Video reports showed troops getting unloaded along with armoured vehicles from military aircraft. Troops took over tasks of Kazakh security forces which included guarding governmental and military facilities (Kriener & Brassat 2023: 277).

Over four days, Russian Aerospace Force planes carried out more than 108 flights, and troops were deployed in Nur-Sultan and Almaty and its surroundings; command posts were set up in the Military Institute of Ground Troops in Almaty (Kremlin.ru 2022). Although numerous concessions were made to protesters and repression did not stop dissent, it was only after the CSTO was brought in that protests began to die out. Authorities justified their actions in combating a 'coup attempt' that was executed by organised criminal groups and 'gangster-led mobs' who were able to take the initiative and exploit what had originally started as a peaceful set of demonstrations on 5 January (Kumenov 2023). The result of CSTO troop intervention was immediate and blunt. On the night of 6 January, Kazakh security forces, supported by CSTO troops, began reclaiming government

administrative buildings that had been seized in Almaty and other urban areas. What's more, they regained control of Republic Square in Almaty where they were reported to have opened fire on protesters during the operation. Forces were shooting unarmed people and were even aiming at cars that were passing by. Upwards of 65 civilians were killed on 6 January. Buildings that were taken over across the Jambyl and Semey regions, in Aktobe airport, as well as the police station in Jambyl and the Nur Otan's ruling party office in Taraz were won back by state and CSTO forces. The quick victories experienced by activists were dealt away with in rapid fashion.

On 5 January, it appeared that the incumbent regime was holding on to its last grasp on power, yet by the end of the subsequent day, all key elements of success that the uprising had experienced up until that point in time were no longer in their control (Anisin 2024). On 10 January 2022, Vladimir Putin publicly addressed the situation and claimed that the CSTO would not permit any of its member states to be overthrown through 'color revolutions' which is a term used to frame externally backed or supported revolutionary campaigns and social movements in the post-Soviet space. He emphasised that the deployment of CSTO troops had been crucial in preventing armed groups from threatening the country's stability and territorial integrity (Reuters 2022). What's more, Putin aimed to send a signal that the CSTO would act and that any other possible revolutions would not be 'allowed' in former Soviet countries by the CSTO (Deutsche Welle 2022c). Also on 10 January 2022 in Moscow, CSTO leaders, including Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan, President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko, President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan Akylbek Japarov, President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon and Secretary General of the Collective Security Treaty Organization Stanislav Zas, held an extraordinary summit to discuss the situation in Kazakhstan and stressed the 'consensus based' nature of decision making to send in troops (Kremlin.ru 2022).

President Tokayev described the 'peacemaking potential' of the CSTO and its usage to ensure 'security, stability and integrity' of one of its member states. He concluded by stating, 'Overall, I would like to emphasise that the CSTO has shown its relevance and effectiveness as a high-profile military-political organisation, an operational mechanism to ensure the stability and security of our states' (Kremlin.ru 2022). Lukashenko likewise argued that the Kazakh case provided a 'lesson' for the CSTO and that the organisation needed to enhance its institutional capacities through strengthening and building up its capabilities, especially its peacekeeping potential. He importantly noted that 'a crackdown at the very outset yields tangible results' (Kremlin.ru 2022). Subsequently, Putin emphasised the threat of external forces to Kazakhstan's statehood and that activists relied on 'Maidan' technologies during protests.

He also pointed towards the legal legitimacy of the intervention by referencing Article 4 of the Collective Security Treaty of 1992. Putin stated:

> Of course, we understand that the events in Kazakhstan are not the first and certainly not the last attempt to interfere in the domestic affairs of our states from outside. I agree with the President of Belarus on this. The measures taken by the CSTO clearly show that we will not allow anyone to stir up trouble at home and will not permit the realisation of another so-called colour revolution scenario. (Kremlin.ru 2022)

The deployment of troops to suppress mass protests in Kazakhstan demonstrates that the CSTO intervenes when a member state's security apparatus faces the risk of collapse or proves unreliable in defending the ruling government in relation to a politically and ideologically threatening group. To contrast these outcomes, we now turn to two cases of non-intervention which share similar dynamics, but also differ in key potentially causal features. In both Kyrgyz revolutions (2005 and 2020), large-scale protests fostered subsequent elite-led actions that arose as a response to disputed parliamentary elections and societal grievances against corruption. Although mobilisation was widespread and concluded in the ouster of incumbent leaders, political actors remained principally contained within the political elite cycle and the state apparatus endured. Security institutions (and forces) were temporarily overwhelmed, but did not disintegrate, then hastily realigned under new leadership. In contrast, the Kazakhstan 2022 case evolved into a large multi-city uprising that combined socioeconomic anger with violent assaults on security buildings and the seizure of airports and strategically important infrastructure. Police units collapsed, armouries were looted, and the government declared that terrorists were starting to overrun the state. The internal coercive structure itself became paralysed which threatened regime survival.

Counterfactual uprisings and framing of 'internal' political unrest

Kyrgyzstan experienced revolutions in 2005 and 2020. Both cases ousted sitting presidents (Askar Akayev and Sooronbay Jeenbekov), but did not bring about CSTO troop deployment or any form of collective enforcement action from the organisation. Even though these cases occurred fifteen years apart in what were truly different geopolitical contexts, they nevertheless share common features which include large-scale protests and security force defections. The Tulip case in March 2005 was driven by civilians' grievances against corruption and perceptions that parliamentary electoral cycles were being manipulated. Prior to the elections, a campaign had already formed (The People's Movement of Kyrgyzstan). Then incumbent, Akayev and his family and close allies were dominant in dictating economic and political outcomes throughout the country (Collins 2006; Radnitz

2010). In February 2005, parliamentary elections led to discontent and spurred various opposition groups to form into regional coalitions in both Jalal-Abad and Osh. Protests then spread from areas away from the capital, especially in the southern part of the country. Protesters were able to occupy different strategic hubs of the regime, including a regional administration building, a TV station and an administrative building (Khamidov 2006). Once dissent arose in the capital, activists successfully overtook and occupied government buildings. Police and local security forces were overwhelmed by demonstrators. The regime responded with repression in Jalal-Abad and Osh, but by 24 March, several youth groups organised thousands of people who gathered in the central square in Bishkek. Large protests formed seeking the incumbent's resignation. Interestingly enough, at this point in time, in the Russian Duma, Dmitry Rogozin and Vladimir Zhirinovsky proposed that CSTO peacekeeping troops be sent to Kyrgyzstan to deal with civil conflict in its southern region.

After violent interactions, protesters ended up overtaking the presidential palace in Bishkek. Akayev fled the country as widespread property destruction and looting occurred (Tudoroiu 2007: 333). State authority collapsed and the capital city experienced civil strife. Meanwhile, the CSTO remained passive. Indeed, the organisation was in its early years, as its secretariat was created only in 2004, and little is known about the state of development of its rapid-reaction capabilities at that period in time. For example, Weinstein had noted they existed only on paper (Weinstein 2007). What's more, even though Russia sustained a military base in Kant (near Bishkek), Moscow ended up not interfering. Interestingly enough, the fleeing of Akayev was perceived as an internal matter, and was thus not related to Article 4. Nor did the CSTO's collective council convene – there was no request for peacekeeping assistance. The political transition that followed this fast-paced governmental overturn saw a very limited role in terms of the CSTO. The subsequent government was led by Kurmanbek Bakiyev and restored order. At that time, there were fears of renewed violence, yet no multilateral peacekeeping mission was deployed. As Laruelle and Engvall (2015) explain, this early episode of revolutionary upheaval led to the CSTO interpreting such cases as domestic disruptions which are not directly applicable to its mandate unless the incumbent government frames them as foreign-instigated or terrorist in nature. While this framing strategy was indeed used in Kazakhstan in 2022, it is unlikely that it is what actually caused the CSTO to deploy troops.

To understand why this is so, we must look back at another uprising that arose in Kyrgyzstan fifteen years after its Tulip revolution. In October 2020, a rebellion occurred and was driven by very similar dynamics and antecedent factors. Although there are still differing narratives about the nature of this uprising (Doolotkeldieva 2021), it followed somewhat of a similar pattern as 2005 – parliamentary elections were disputed and large-scale protests arose in

Bishkek. A significant cleavage came to the surface between the northern parts of the country in relation to the south. Economic turmoil was also present as a result of dislocations induced by the COVID-19 pandemic and job loss was rampant, with unemployment spiralling up to 31% (Szukalski 2024: 275). Again, opposition groups seized the government headquarters – clashing with security forces in the process. This happened during the night of 5 October. Police responses to the demonstration were not enough even though heavy tear gassing and water cannons were directed towards protesters (Reuters 2020). The National Security Committee building was overrun (Al Jazeera 2020). Several political actors were freed from detention, including former President Almazbek Atambayev and politician Sadyr Japarov. At this point, although Jeenbekov declared a state of emergency and ordered troops into Bishkek (Dzyubenko 2020), this did not prevent dissent from dying down. Within several days, the incumbent leader resigned from his post. At the time, it was unclear as to whether the CSTO might intervene to restore order. Yet, just as in 2005, the organisation refrained from intervention. The acting prime minister, Japarov, did not formally request CSTO assistance, and Moscow quickly signalled its acceptance of the new authorities and described the situation as an internal affair (Buranelli 2022). This is a surprising position to take (retrospectively), as it appears that there was much more elite fragmentation after the 2020 events in comparison to 2005 (Sheranova & Uraimov 2023).

Thus, the CSTO's selective pattern of inaction exhibits how the organisation intervenes only when internal instability threatens regime survival and a given member state's monopoly over violence. When a member state's coercive apparatus becomes weakened to the point that the government cannot restore order through its own forces, this is when the organisation deploys troops. As noted above, in Kyrgyzstan's revolutions, incumbent rulers either stepped down or were ousted, but the state did not temporarily lose control of its security institutions. In 2005, Akayev fled and the successor government quickly consolidated authority; in 2020, although Jeenbekov's control evaporated, the army and interior troops did not defect to the side of protesters. In both cases, the coercive core of the state survived and reconstituted itself without prolonged civil conflict. Despite temporary confusion and protester seizures of government buildings, the armed forces and police remained fundamentally intact, and elite negotiations quickly restored political order.

Discussion

The sole intervention of the CSTO was an instance of regional regime stabilisation that can be assumed to be embedded in the post-Soviet architecture. In literature on regionalism and illiberal solidarity in Central Asia, multilateral institutions have been observed to serve to protect incumbents. In this sense, the CSTO's function during the Kazakh revolutionary uprising complements what Allison

(2013), Buranelli (2018; 2022), Ambrosio (2008, 2010) as well as Cooley (2012, 2015) have referred to as authoritarian regionalism. This functions as a form of security cooperation wherein formal multilateral mechanisms disguise and reinforce domestic regime durability through provision of mutual protection for autocratic elites. Allison (2013) demonstrated that post-Soviet regional organisations are likely to function as tools through which Russia and allied regimes manage internal instability. In some instances, this can empirically manifest under the guise of multilateralism. As revealed in the present study's assessment of the Kazakh CSTO intervention, Tokayev appealed to the CSTO and framed its necessary response in the backdrop of discourse of foreign-backed terrorism. What ended up unfolding empirically, however, was that the intervention reasserted state control over a mass revolutionary uprising that had mobilised against economic inequality and dysfunctional political institutions. Buranelli (2018) pointed out that when incumbent leaders engage in antagonising rhetoric on the topic of counterterrorism, it can play a legitimising role through which regional institutions efficiently justify coercive stabilisation. This likewise helps to offset political opposition to state-led crackdowns on activists and helps them to avoid stigma of repressive actions and responses. Another relevant dynamic to consider here pertains to what Ambrosio (2010) referred to as authoritarian diffusion in which the spread of nondemocratic governance practices through cooperative security mechanisms reduces the reputational and material costs of repression. This pertains to the underlying logic of the institutional design of regional bodies in Eurasia which some believe to be built on shared anxieties held by ruling elites about dealing with potential internal unrest. For example, Cooley (2012) argued that instead of pursuing collective defence against external enemies, the promotion of a sovereignty-protective model of regional order is favoured. Here, sovereignty gets reinterpreted as a metaphorical shield for illiberal governance. Such a form of regionalism embeds Russia's hierarchical role in the post-Soviet space. Similarly, As Cooley (2015) notes, Moscow's leadership in both the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union epitomises how regional integration has been repurposed to sustain a complex system of dependency (rather than organic symmetrical cooperation).

The sole CSTO intervention served both as a mechanism of domestic repression and as a performance of regional solidarity which, although rare, had an impact that ended up being effective. Indeed, in comparison to the many bouts of collective signalling that were identified in Nasibov's (2025) inquiry, the sole deployment of CSTO troops in 2022 is a much rarer phenomenon. Indeed, as Nasibov notes, the CSTO is a political tool that poses very subtle empirical functions – most of which manifest under domestic pressures. Importantly, however, we should concurrently not underestimate the organisation's hard power ability in being able to deploy troops when revolutionary upheavals pose

a threat to the institutional makeup of a given member state's polity. As such, we can observe that a key part of the organisation functions through a hierarchical intervention system in which Moscow plays the role of principal and smaller autocracies play the role of dependent agents. Investigating this organisation and its actions (or lack of actions) in future research can be done through capturing dynamics that are inherent to its principal-agent asymmetries. At this point in the organisation's history, intervention occurs when instability in a member state could jeopardise Russia's regional hegemony and bring a group to power that might capture a polity and put it at potential ideological or strategic odds with Moscow. Non-intervention, conversely, is likely when crises are seen as containable or not strategically vital.

Looking ahead, the CSTO makeup and its policies may change in terms of their geographical reach. Back in February 2022, Russia signed a Joint Declaration with China on the topic of preventing 'color' revolutions (Kim 2023), and this set of each country's foreign policy goals was articulated with relation to the expansion of NATO on one hand, and the role of the US in Taiwan on the other. Time will tell if a relatively clandestine aspect of the future of geopolitical struggles between Russia, the US and China will be marked by covert regime change-seeking operations. If this occurs, then global geopolitical struggles of the future may reflect a rebirth of earlier Cold War–derived logics wherein large powers support foreign regime change against incumbent governments they find adversarial (O'Rourke 2018).

Conclusion

In this study, a comparative inquiry into CSTO interventions and non-interventions has been carried out. Thus far, the CSTO has infrequently deployed troops into its member states in comparison to interventions and outcomes that arose during the Cold War under the previous security architecture of the USSR-led Warsaw Pact. By comparing different cases in which CSTO interventions could have occurred to the sole instance of the organisation's troop deployment, this study has revealed that a determining factor behind CSTO intervention is not political turnover but the continuity of coercive capacity and a member state's monopoly over violence. During protest and large-scale uprisings, where militaries and police remained intact, the CSTO abstained, but when they became fractured, intervention followed. Preventing the rise of hostile regimes in its member states appears to be a core function of the CSTO. The sole deployment of troops ended up significantly contributing to regime preservation. With these findings in mind, this study is not without shortcomings. The data that were relied on were mostly secondary sources and were absent of primary interview evidence potentially stemming from policymakers, diplomats (or even security officials) from CSTO member states. Since the organisation's decision-making

processes are impervious and its inner workings are seldom documented in public sources, such a limitation constrains this study's ability to reconstruct the direct strategic calculations that precede intervention or non-intervention. Another limitation is in some of the variables that were analysed in the comparative framework, as I was not able to capture all potential social and perceptual dimensions of regime security among elites, especially pertaining to informal expectations of reciprocal support by security forces.

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