

Russia's CSTO Intervention in Kazakhstan: Motives, Risks and Consequences

SCEEUS Commentary

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The violent clashes in Kazakhstan and the consequent intervention by the Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in January 2022 have increased Russia's influence in Central Asia's largest and richest country. The combination of strengthened authoritarianism and increased dependence on Moscow is in Russia's interest and may inspire Russia to take a similar approach to any future popular uprisings in its neighbourhood. The intervention also sets a precedent for the use of the CSTO for internal repression in the post-Soviet space.

What has happened and why it matters

On 2 January 2022, protests erupted in the city of Zhanaozen in western Kazakhstan, spurred by a near-doubling in the price of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG). Much is still unclear, but the originally relatively unorganized protests rapidly spread nationwide, and widened to demands for political reform and changes to the country's leadership. The protests culminated in large street clashes between protesters and police on 5–6 January, which included looting, the destruction of property and attacks on local administration buildings in the country's largest city, Almaty. Over 150 police officers and protesters were killed in the clashes and almost 10,000 people have been [detained](#).

On 6 January, following a request for assistance by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to "overcome this terrorist threat", troops began arriving from other members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a Russia-dominated security alliance of six former-Soviet republics (Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan) created in 1992. Reports indicate that [3000](#) "peacekeepers" were sent from Russia, [500](#) from Belarus, [200](#) from Tajikistan, [150](#) from Kyrgyzstan and [70](#) from Armenia. They were used to guard strategic facilities and not to participate in action against the protestors. Interestingly, the CSTO force was led by a Russian commander, Andrey Serdyukov, who had previously commanded the Russian forces in Syria and led troops during the annexation of Crimea. These forces were dispatched under the

CSTO's Article 4, which like NATO's Article 5 obliges member states to provide necessary aid, including military assistance, on request in the case of external aggression against a member state.

The CSTO deployment is significant for several reasons. First, this is the first time that Article 4 has been invoked and the CSTO has deployed troops. Similar requests have been declined previously, such as from Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and Armenia in [2021](#). Second, the purpose of Article 4 is to counter outside threats – and Kyrgyzstan's 2010 request was denied precisely on the basis that the protests that led to the request were an internal matter. This time, however, Armenia's Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, the current chair of the CSTO Collective Security Council, announced just a few hours after the request had been made that the CSTO had agreed to send peacekeeping forces, with the aim of stabilizing the situation and countering threats, "including from external interference", to Kazakhstan's security and sovereignty. Thus far, such claims of externally instigated protests, which were also made by both President Tokayev and Russia's President Vladimir Putin, lack any support from reported facts on the ground. However, they align well with the narrative commonly used by post-Soviet authoritarian regimes to explain similar protests.

Third, the intervention gives the CSTO much-needed positive credentials among its member state governments. The organization has long been accused by many of being a "paper tiger", able neither to unite its member states nor to come to their aid in their hour of need. It has also been perceived as an instrument of Russian influence, and thus met little enthusiasm from other member countries, for which it has mostly been a way of acquiring Russian military equipment at a discount.

What are the motives behind Russia's CSTO intervention?

Russia has numerous motives for its CSTO intervention in Kazakhstan. As with all Russian foreign policy, the overall goals of regime survival, power consolidation both domestically and abroad – particularly in its desired "sphere of influence" – and countering other actors, mainly the West, are all relevant.

Kazakhstan is also key strategically for Russia. Central Asia's largest country by area – and the ninth largest in the world – shares a 7,644-kilometre border with Russia (the second longest after the US-Canada border). This border is largely unprotected, and unrest and instability in Kazakhstan could easily spread to Russia. Kazakhstan's vast territory was part of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union, and has for centuries conveniently served as a buffer against potential military threats from the south. A large minority – 3.5 million or 18 per cent – of the population are ethnic Russians. Russia has four military installations in Kazakhstan, the most important of which is the

5th Space Test Range in Baikonur. Kazakhstan is also a close ally of Russia and a vital member of both the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Finally, while the regime is no Kremlin puppet and sometimes frustrates Russia, it is far preferable to Moscow than any potential alternative, be it ultra-nationalist, Islamist or semi-democratic.

Moreover, a key goal of Russia is to prevent regime change in its neighbourhood. Disturbances in Kazakhstan, not to mention the toppling of its current regime, has the potential to start a chain reaction in a region already destabilized by – and under threat of spreading extremism from – Afghanistan. Russia has long accused the West of spurring so-called colour revolutions in the post-Soviet space, and claimed that the ultimate goal is regime change in Russia itself. In a virtual CSTO meeting on 10 January 2022, Putin stated that colour revolutions would not be allowed in “our states”. While Russia was quite unprepared for the first wave of colour revolutions in 2003–2005 (Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan), it responded faster to the more recent protests in Ukraine (2013–2014) and Belarus (2020). In Kazakhstan, Moscow quickly took the initiative before the situation could spiral out of control, thereby demonstrating that it has learned lessons and become a more proactive, flexible and resolved security actor in its neighbourhood.

What are the CSTO intervention's most important consequences for Russia?

The CSTO deployment has several crucial positive consequences for Russia. Importantly, it will probably enhance Russia's influence in Kazakhstan and Central Asia, and diminish that of other actors. Like other post-Soviet authoritarian regimes, Kazakhstan has long pursued a “multi-vector” foreign policy by seeking to nurture ties with different actors, mainly Russia, China and the West, reflecting the need to balance security interests, independence and economic growth. Through the military assistance of mainly Russian CSTO troops – instead of, for example, forces from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which includes both Russia and China, and also reportedly offered assistance to Kazakhstan – this equilibrium has been upset. Turkey, which promotes a “Turkic world” concept that encompasses Kazakhstan, also expressed a readiness to support the Kazakhstan regime but ultimately played no role on the ground.

Thus, the situation is similar to events in Belarus following the violent protests in 2020, and in Armenia after the Second Karabakh War in the same year, which ended with Russian peacekeepers being sent to the conflict zone in Azerbaijan. Kazakhstan's regime will become more dependent on Russia for its survival, and Russia's clout will grow stronger while the influence of Western actors and China is potentially weakened. Moreover, that the decision to send CSTO troops to Kazakhstan was formally taken by Armenia's prime minister, who himself came to power

after widespread street protests, and that both Armenia and Belarus sent soldiers abroad – Belarus for the first time – arguably shows Russia's influence over these two countries.

In addition, the success of the primary objectives of the intervention – to quell the protests and support a Kremlin-friendly regime – does not just increase Russia's influence in Kazakhstan and beyond. It also sends a strong signal that Russia is the main security provider in Central Asia and the post-Soviet space, and boosts Russia's narrative of being a partner willing and able to rescue friendly regimes and provide them with security and stability, as Russia showed in Syria 2015.

Although, [according](#) to President Tokayev, the CSTO troops will begin their withdrawal on 13 January, Russia faces risks with this and any future intervention, such as being dragged into the ongoing internal Kazakhstani power-struggle between the respective (and partly overlapping) clans loyal to the current president and the former president and “Leader of the Nation” (*Elbasy*), Nursultan Nazarbayev. Apparently to appease the protesters, on 5 January, without providing any legal justification, Tokayev dismissed Nazarbayev from his lifetime post as head of the Security Council, from where he is believed to have retained the real power in the country even after resigning as president in 2019. This will probably make any similar arrangement less appetizing for Putin and other authoritarian leaders in the post-Soviet space.

Like Russia's support for the Belarusian regime in 2020, the intervention will also test Russia's ability to prop up allied regimes without antagonizing their populations, as many in Kazakhstan oppose CSTO involvement. Russia-Kazakhstan relations have generally been cordial and close but not without some friction. In particular, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 sent shockwaves throughout the post-Soviet space. Only a few months after the annexation, Putin infuriated the Kazakhs by saying that Kazakhstan was an artificial country created by Nazarbayev, and that Kazakhstan's population understood the importance of close relations with Russia. Following this, Russian media and some politicians began to regularly question the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Kazakhstan while also raising the issue of Russian minority rights.

Furthermore, the absence of the SCO and China from the situation's resolution might have provoked Beijing, which enjoys a strong economic partnership with Nur-Sultan. China is Kazakhstan's largest export partner, receives one-fifth of its gas from the country, and has invested heavily there as a central part of its Belt and Road Initiative. However, China takes a cautious and measured approach in pursuit of its economic goals while balancing its relations with Russia and navigating Moscow's security interests in the region. China also shares Russia's goals of maintaining stability, limiting extremism and opposing Western influence and democratization in the region. On 7 January China's President Xi Jinping congratulated his Kazakh counterpart for

successfully dealing with a “color revolution”, thereby adopting Moscow and Nur-Sultan’s “external influence” narrative.

Finally, the timing of the intervention could also have an impact on the tensions between Russia and the West over Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine and the related high-level dialogues taking place this week. Although the situation in Kazakhstan could draw some of Moscow’s attention and resources away from Ukraine, it could also lead the Kremlin to perceive itself as even more than ever surrounded by trouble and instability, and thus needing to assert itself elsewhere in order to protect its interests. The successful intervention in Kazakhstan could also enhance Russia’s self-confidence and underline its message about its self-proclaimed special right and duty to govern the post-Soviet space, from Belarus and Ukraine to Central Asia.

The way ahead

Several aspects will be interesting to monitor in the coming weeks. First, will new protests and social unrest erupt soon? If not, the Kazakhstan regime’s violent but successful way of dealing with the protests, including by enlisting the aid of the CSTO, could set a precedent for other authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet space. Second, will the CSTO withdrawal be complete, or will some Russian troops remain? For Russia, keeping forces in Kazakhstan means more influence, but it would also mean less sovereignty for Kazakhstan and possibly greater alienation for its people. Third, how will the internal power struggle between Tokayev and Nazarbayev play out? The fate of Nazarbayev will be watched closely by other autocrats – not least Putin – who are eyeing their potential future and legacy.