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Implication for Regional and World Order

Filippo Costa Buranelli

In the first two weeks of 2022, Kazakhstan was ravaged by an unprecedented scale of protests, violence, and repression. While it is still very much difficult to know what exactly caused the clashes, what seems to be the case is that it involved the meeting of two different and separated dynamics. The *first* was peaceful protest, which originated in the west of the country because of the doubling of LPG prices alongside the solidarity expressed with the protesters in other parts of the country, i.e., in the north as well as in the east and the south. The second was the presence of violent bandits, criminals, and hooligans that in less than perfect coordination set ablaze Almaty, Taraz, Shymkent, and other centers in the south, which led to the bloodiest clashes in the history of independent Kazakhstan. In

a series of rapid escalations, which even those inside the Central Asian nation are still struggling to understand, the initially peaceful marches descended into violence.

On 5 January 2022, the Kazakhstani authorities, fearing for the collapse of the constitutional order and for the state to spiral into country-wide bloodshed, decided to request the intervention of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to protect sensitive and strategic infrastructural objectives such as power grids and airports so to allow to the internal security forces to repress and quell the violence. On 6 January 2022, the CSTO Collective Security Council issued a statement indicating its decision to “send the CSTO Collective Peacekeeping Forces to the Republic

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of Kazakhstan for a limited period of time to stabilize and normalize the situation in that country.” The same day, these forces began to arrive in Kazakhstan. On 19 January 2022, the CSTO Secretary General informed the CSTO Collective Security Council that all contingents of its Collective Peacekeeping Forces have been withdrawn from the territory of Kazakhstan.

Much ink has been spilled in writing about why these events took place, what caused them, who was behind them, and who or what favored them. Most of what has appeared in print has not been particularly coherent or accurate. The truth is that too little is known at the moment: much time will need to pass for scholars to gain a clear understanding of what exactly happened within the Kazakhstani security and elite apparatus so that these violent dynamics could be unleashed.

Yet, what has been somehow neglected and, when addressed, grossly simplified, is the role that the CSTO had in addressing the crisis, let alone the potential reper-

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cussions that this intervention may have on the Central Asian regional order and world order more widely. The escalation of the conflict over Ukraine that was triggered by the onset of Russia’s “special military operation” in late February 2022 has further muddied the analytical waters.

What has gone largely unnoticed is that the revival of this regional alliance, which has been institutionally dormant in the previous years, may be read as a sign that the dynamics leading world order to embrace region-based multilateralism and a more embedded pluralism—defined as diversity of political ideas, norms, and principles—are getting stronger and clearer. Furthermore, this may mean that Eurasian regionalism itself is at a crossroads. But let’s go in order.

Some Clarifications

First, clarity in terms of membership and vocabulary, as well as with respect to historical analogies, is much needed. In many reputable Western media outlets, from the

U.S. to Italy going through Germany and the UK, among others, the term ‘CSTO’ was often used as a synonym for ‘Russia.’ Clearly, this is not the case. Nobody disputes the fact that, in terms of budget contributions, units’ contributions, official language of meetings, and general overseeing of the organization (including the location of the institutional structure thereof), Russia is the primary actor within the CSTO. One just has to acknowledge that 90 percent of the budget of the organization is contributed by Russia. Yet, to equate the two is to seriously misunderstand a project that—despite the preponderance just noted—is nonetheless multilateral in nature. Russia aside, member states to the organization are Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The importance of this multilateralism will be explained later in this essay. For now, it is important to remind the readers that the CSTO is a multilateral organization and that neglecting this multilateralism means to downplay a shared consensus and understanding on some of the cardinal principles at the heart of the organization, such as regime security and territorial integrity, that sustain and perpetuate the Eurasian regional order.

Second, the labeling of the CSTO intervention into Kazakhstan as an ‘invasion.’ This, again, is a gross

misreading and mislabeling of what, in all effects, was an intervention following a formal request coming from the highest authority of the state experiencing internal turmoil on the basis of Article 4 of the CSTO charter. The CSTO forces entered Kazakhstani territory only after a formal invitation was extended, the necessary paperwork approved, and a decision reached by a consensus of its members was approved. As a matter of fact, Article 5 of the CSTO charter stresses the voluntary participation of its members, while Article 12 prescribes consensus when it comes to the resolutions of the main bodies of the organization, i.e., the Council for Collective Security, the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, the Council of Ministers of Defense, and the Committee of Secretaries of Security Councils.

Third, this multilateral enterprise should not be confused either with prior historical examples like the Warsaw Pact or analogized with contemporary organizations (e.g., the CSTO as a ‘mini-NATO’). Different from both, the CSTO manifestly lacks an underlying ideology and is mostly a tool for Russia to keep military ties with some former Soviet republics, an opportunity for smaller states to benefit from security cooperation

with Russia, and a platform to facilitate military arms sales, training, and the exchange of documents and data related to security. Let alone the enormous geographical, historical, and membership- and endowment-wise differences.

If anything, it is the lack of coordination with the United Nations, expressly foreseen by Chapter VIII of the UN Charter and recently disciplined by UN General Assembly resolution 73/331, adopted on 25 July 2019, that has been both surprising and a bone of contention. The text of said resolution includes various formulations “inviting” and “encouraging” the UN and the CSTO to “continue,” “enhance,” “increase,” or “strengthen” their “coordination,” “cooperation,” “collaboration,” “interaction,” and “consultations” in various areas, including peacekeeping. But nothing more substantive than that. Still, the CSTO chose not to “consult” with the UN in the context of its intervention in Kazakhstan. Additional analysis will be required with respect to its motivations, although it may have had to do partly with the urgency of the matter and partly with its evolving understanding of the abovementioned embedded pluralism and its operation along strong regional multilateral lines.

Nonetheless, what is interesting to note is that right after the termination of the CSTO mission in Kazakhstan, the CSTO Secretary General Stanislav Zas and the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs Miroslav Jenča had a meeting in which the latter noted that he was impressed by the speed and excellent organization of the transfer and deployment of the CSTO Collective Peacekeeping Forces into the Republic of Kazakhstan and appreciated the rapidity of contacts between the CSTO and the UN Secretariats and emphasized that the UN Secretary-General received timely information from the CSTO about the current situation and the deployment of the peacekeeping contingent. Also, the UN Security Council was notified of the CSTO’s decision, as were the secretaries general of the OSCE and the SCO. As shall be said more on this below, notification is not consultation.

Past Operations and Present Circumstances

In previous years, the CSTO had several opportunities to intervene in conflicts taking place on the territory of its members. First, there were the inter-ethnic clashes in Osh, in southern Kyrgyzstan, for which the Kyrgyz interim

leadership guided by Roza Otunbayeva asked the CSTO to intervene so as to restore order and stability. This was in June 2010. Back then, not only did the CSTO refuse to intervene because the matter was considered by other CSTO members

an internal affair of Kyrgyzstan, but also different member states opposed the intervention on the grounds that this would have embroiled the organization in a potentially explosive ethnic conflict between two member states with potentially long-lasting consequences in terms of patterns of amity/enmity in the region. In this respect, the fear of Russia coming was especially voiced by then president of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, at a time when Uzbekistan was still a member to the organization.

More recently, in 2020, and again in Kyrgyzstan, violence erupted that brought Sadyr Japarov to power. This led to requests for a CSTO intervention, which again was declined on the basis of the internal nature of the conflict. Third, also in 2020, the CSTO's intervention was requested by Armenia during

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the conflict over Karabakh with Azerbaijan. And, once again, this was deemed (mostly by Russia) to be an internal conflict (i.e., a conflict taking place entirely on the territory of a non-CSTO member) and hence outside the legitimate jurisdiction of the organization.

These three refused interventions, whatever the legitimacy of their grounds, led many analysts and scholars to dub the CSTO as a paper tiger, as the dog that does not bark, as a simulacrum of an organization that exists perhaps de jure but not really de facto.

The curious thing is that in the wake of its intervention in Kazakhstan, many of those same analyses and commentaries portray the organization as a vehicle of Russian imperialism and a threat to the sovereignty of its member states while also questioning why the CSTO intervened in the first place. It seems like a typical case where neither action nor inaction are satisfying outcomes. As with most things in politics, and indeed life, perhaps the truth is in somewhere in the middle. The CSTO is not perhaps an organization as active, as integrated,

and as politicized as NATO; but at the same time, it is not a smokescreen for the grand designs of territorial conquest and revisionism of one or more of its member states.

The technicalities of the recent mission to Kazakhstan may help understand this point better. Notwithstanding the post facto cries that the intervention was a general rehearsal for Ukraine or that it represented yet another attempted power-grab orchestrated by Russia, the mission counted approximately 2,500 personnel, 700 of which were Belarussian, plus Armenian, Kyrgyz, and Tajik contingents, with duties of protection and surveillance of sensible infrastructure. This is not exactly an overwhelming number of soldiers. The mission lasted some 10 days, and the entire CSTO contingent left Kazakhstani territory within the timeline agreed by all members and suggested by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev himself on 19 January 2022.

This all took place in the aftermath of two quite infelicitous statements by U.S. Secretary of State Tony Blinken, who first argued that “once Russians are in your house, it’s sometimes very difficult to get them to leave,” before later going on to say that “Kazakhstan will need to offer an explanation as to why the CSTO was invited.” The first statement was

proven wrong in light of events and, once again, seemed to neglect the fact that this was a multilateral enterprise (with the already acknowledged prominent role played by Russia, hinted at by Tokayev himself in his speech expressing gratitude to CSTO leaders). The second statement showed a peculiar interpretation of diplomacy and sovereignty: after all, Kazakhstan is a country that, being sovereign, is entitled to ask for help to whomever it wants—and this requires no further explanation, certainly not to those who have no standing to ask for one. These statements by Blinken, paired with the widespread misunderstandings analyzed above, have not proved helpful to understanding the events in Kazakhstan, let alone to the establishment of a milder and more favorable diplomatic climate between great powers, which would have been helpful, to say the least, in these recent weeks of mistrust and mutual suspicion in the context of the conflict over Ukraine.

Regional and Global Implications

As stated above, very few analyses have devoted enough time and attention to the regional implications of the CSTO's intervention in Kazakhstan—much less to its potential repercussions on world

order. First, to understand one of the most crucial consequences of these events, we need to go back to what I had said earlier about the fundamental multilateral enterprise of the CSTO's intervention in Kazakhstan.

The powerful message that was sent can be summarized as follows: "Eurasia is ready to support and entrench incumbents whenever they are under foreign threat." It is undeniable, as a matter of fact, that the CSTO's Kazakhstan intervention marked a watershed for Eurasian regional security, given that it represents the first example of a deployment of military units in Central Asia from abroad since the Tajik civil war (1992-1997). A new trend in rising solidarity and mutual assistance in Central Asia may well be on its way.

This qualitative change in the CSTO's organizational purpose—which went from a coordinating and rather technical organization to a more proactive and solidaristic multilateral forum in the field of security in a matter of weeks—is perhaps surprising, although not exactly sudden. As a matter of fact, on 19 May 2021, a meeting of the CSTO

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Council of Foreign Ministers was held in Dushanbe. This organ approved a draft Agreement on Jurisdiction and Legal Assistance in Cases Related to the Temporary Presence of Forces and Means of the Collective Security System in the

Territories of the CSTO Member States. The purpose of this document, as reported by the CSTO, is to "create a mechanism for cooperation between the competent authorities of the CSTO member states: military police, military investigation, military prosecutor's office, military courts (tribunals) in criminal and administrative cases against persons who are part of the forces and means of the collective security system." The Agreement was then signed in Dushanbe on 16 September 2021, during the next session of the CSTO Collective Security Council. With the benefit of hindsight, this development is crucial in understanding the shift of the organization's self-defined purpose.

Thus, the first consequence of the CSTO intervention is that it seems to be in line with already consolidated trends about regime (or at least incumbent)

protection—the understanding that *avtoritet* and *stabil'nost'* constitute the two normative cornerstones of the Eurasian order. This is mostly evident in the way in which members states and crucial non-member states (e.g., China and Uzbekistan) rallied around the justification provided by Tokayev to invoke, legitimately in his mind and in that of his regional peers, Article 4 of the CSTO charter to allow for foreign forces.

For example, Beijing has a lot to lose from destabilization in the region, hence China was relatively muted as the violence broke out in Kazakhstan, expressing no concerns about the CSTO mission and backing the diagnosis that a foreign-sponsored coup could be in progress.

Whether this rationale is authentic, legitimate, and corroborated by the findings that the investigation wanted by Tokayev is now tasked to produce, is another matter. What matters here (since it has profound relevance for the salience of the notion of embedded pluralism) is the common normative and ethical understanding of what sovereignty, order, legitimacy, and stability has for the CSTO and

its member states. This may not be seen necessarily as a direct promotion of authoritarianism, but rather as a convergence around a specific meaning of sovereignty,

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authority, and stability that converge around the idea of strong rule. In this respect, one may even look at the CSTO intervention not as an act of regional politics, but in fact as one of domestic politics—with Tokayev invoking its pres-

ence on Kazakhstani soil to be legitimized by his peers. While often overlooked in (mostly, but not exclusively) Western analyses of Eurasian regionalism, symbolism is a crucial component thereof.

The second consequence of the CSTO intervention in Kazakhstan is that it may potentially create mutual suspicion and an additional fracture within the Central Asian regional security complex, as this trend may not necessarily apply to Uzbekistan. On the same day that the CSTO announced the deployment of "Collective Peacekeeping Forces" to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an official note saying that the country

expressed confidence and hope in the leadership of Kazakhstan, and that it was sure the situation could be resolved without external

assistance. The actual deployment of the CSTO units and, perhaps even more importantly, the 10 January 2022 statement made by the president of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko, during an emergency meeting of the CSTO Collective Security Council (no less) that the next possible unrest could take place in Uzbekistan, have increased the suspicion of Uzbekistan towards security-based multilateral organizations. Incidentally, one could say that this suspicion is enshrined in the country's 2015 foreign policy concept, which has recently been reaffirmed, that states its commitment not to join military blocs.

In any event, Lukashenko's comments caused public outrage in Uzbekistan, especially among local pundits and in the expert community, although remarks by Uzbekistani officials stayed relatively restrained. Across the media, Lukashenko's remarks were called a "diplomatic mistake" and a "threat to Uzbekistan's sovereignty." Uzbekistani experts generally agreed that, as they put it, "Europe's

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last dictator" was doing the Kremlin's bidding: the thinly veiled message found in his clumsy remarks was allegedly intended to heighten

pressure on Uzbekistan to join the CSTO and other Russia-led regionalist organizations. To Uzbekistani observers, Lukashenko's pointed remarks were the latest in a long series of attempts by Russia to pressure Uzbekistan into joining the CSTO.

However, that pressure campaign has so far been backfiring. Indeed, the CSTO troop deployment to Kazakhstan, combined with Lukashenko's warning, united Uzbekistani officials, local opinion leaders, and experts in rejecting CSTO membership under any circumstances. Whatever the Kazakhstani leader's reasons for calling in CSTO peacekeepers, political elites and experts in Uzbekistan collectively and resolutely rejected any such possibility for their own country. Specifically, they have characterized any potential invitation for foreign troops to put down domestic protests as tantamount to losing one's sovereign statehood and as a national humiliation in light of the achievement of 30 years of independence.

It is therefore legitimate to expect that, from the Uzbek side, there will be a dual move. *First*, that the abovementioned solidarist trend between Eurasian and Central Asian states with respect to regime protection and the entrenchment of incumbents will meet the favor of Tashkent in normative terms, but not in terms

of how to do enforce it—this will basically amount to a dovetailing between regional norms and regional practices. *Second*, and consequently, Tashkent is likely to continue its policy of bilateralism in foreign policy,

pursuing further cooperation and coordination with neighboring countries and Russia in the field of military and state security without participating in formalized multilateral structures. Thus, the big question remains what the future of Eurasian security will look like without Uzbekistan's position being formalized.

The third consequence of the CSTO intervention is that it will be reasonable to expect more openness, and a greater propensity, to discuss a possibly more pro-

active role for the CSTO in future conflicts in Eurasia. After all, what recent events have shown is that, irrespectively of the normative standings and preferences of analysts, the CSTO has indeed demonstrated a surprising ability to adapt to local contingencies and to pursue pragmatic, goal-oriented

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coordination. While future interventions will keep being discussed on a case-by-case basis, it is clear that what happened in Kazakhstan will ensure the organization has more leeway to try to play a more active role that goes beyond

coordination, training, and information-sharing, perhaps assuming even a mediating role in some of the existing tense situations in the region. It is not by chance, perhaps, that the wave of violence that erupted on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border in the final days of January 2022 prompted CSTO Secretary General Stanislav Stas to voice the organization's availability to play a role in resolving the issue, including mediation. This, it should be noted, contrasts starkly with the rebuttal that Kyrgyzstan's Japarov got right at a CSTO meeting in 2021

when he mentioned the CSTO as a possible arbitrator in the issue of Kyrgyz-Tajik border conflicts, thus signaling an evolution in the organization—and, perhaps, of its strategic objectives, too.

The fourth and final consequence of the CSTO intervention in Kazakhstan has more of a global reach. I hinted at this at the beginning of this essay: we may be seeing the onset of a push towards an even more entrenched and embedded pluralism in world order. This is evidenced in the statement issued on 26 May 2020 by the foreign ministers of the CSTO member states that called for establishing a fairer and more democratic world order. In particular, as Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov explained at the time, the CSTO foreign ministers “supported the creation of a fairer and more democratic world order based on internationally recognized principles of international law” and “adopted a joint statement on this issue, which reaffirms the commitment of the CSTO members to the goals and principles of the UN Charter.” To many, this sounds like an inconsistency—perhaps even a contradiction in terms—given the authoritarian governance structure of most polities in Eurasia. However, one needs to go deeper in the

analytical interpretation of this term, to understand that a “democratic world order” is one that is organized along the lines of a pluralist ethics and communitarian principles, and that it is democratic in that allows for fundamental differences to coexist—in other words, embedded pluralism.

Here, in this context, by “pluralism” I mean the diffuse distribution of power, wealth, and cultural authority; and by “embedded” I mean that cultural and ideological difference are not only tolerated, but respected and even valued as the foundation of coexistence. This is a concept that, *in nuce*, began to appear quite frequently in Russian official speeches (let alone in those of Central Asians) in the past few years, is inherently linked to the concept of embedded pluralism, and, indeed, is aligned to the kind of strategic and discursive narratives deployed by Chinese officials, too.

A few Russian examples are sufficient for present purposes. In a November 2021 address to the Russia-Islamic World Strategic Vision Group, Russian president Vladimir Putin mentioned the need for a “democratic world order [...] that is based on the rule of law and the peaceful coexistence of states and is free of the

dictate of force and any forms of discrimination.” Putin also argued for the necessity of “promoting an interfaith and inter-civilizational dialogue, ensuring international stability and security, and building a fairer and democratic world order” at the Twelfth International Economic Summit between Russia and the Islamic world in Kazan, which took place in July 2021. A few months earlier, Lavrov had promoted “the objective trend for democratizing interaction between states and creating a fair, inclusive, and polycentric world order” in his meeting with UN Secretary-General António Guterres, stressing that “the voice of every country, regardless of its size, military, or economic capacity, must be heard within the framework of this democratic world order.” Of some interest, perhaps, is that the same concerns were voiced at the Sixth BRICS Parliamentary Forum in late October 2020 by the Chairman of the State Duma, Vyacheslav Volodin.

Fairer and More Democratic World Order

In this respect, the CSTO intervention in Kazakhstan has indeed entrenched this understanding of world order as it

applies to Eurasia along three fundamental trajectories. First, the understanding of sovereignty not as a right but as a capacity. In other words, sovereignty in Eurasia is qualified as such not through a nominal act of international law (*superiorem non recognoscens*), but through the ability of the leadership of regional states to maintain social order, keep competing groups in check, and quell dissent that may drive such state too far from Moscow’s interests.

Second, the fact that international security in Eurasia has again taken on a much-severed regional trend. This was evident not just in how swiftly the division of labor between Russia and China—premised on Russia providing military and security support and China economic incentives and opportunities—has been implemented, but also in the rapidity of the coordination and the deployment of the Kazakhstani operation, as well as the marginalization of any other actors, both state and international. As a matter of fact, no concerted great power management was visible, and the relevant international organizations were “informed” and “notified,” not “consulted.” This speaks directly to the idea of a “more democratic world order” that this episode symbolizes.

This friction was visible also in how the United Nations noted that members of a Kazakhstani military unit known as the Kazakhstan Battalion (KAZBAT)—which is drawn from the country's airborne forces and participates in UN missions abroad—were photographed wearing blue helmets (the images were taken by a local photographer and then spread globally by the U.S.-based AP news agency) and yet were not part of a UN peacekeeping mission. A UN spokesperson was quoted by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, a U.S.-government-funded news organization, as stating that “United Nations troop and police contributing countries are to use the UN insignia only when they are performing their mandated tasks as UN peacekeepers, in the context of their deployment within a United Nations peacekeeping operation as mandated by the UN Security Council,” which was, of course, not what took place in Kazakhstan. Yet, as we noted above, the UN was quick to congratulate CSTO's conflict-management once its mission was over.

Third, this episode may signal a push to regionalize conflict-management, allowing regional great powers to take ownership of their own regional security complexes—at least in instances in

which other (regional) great powers do not object. An earlier example of this, similar in many respects to the CSTO's intervention in Kazakhstan, was the 2011 deployment of the Peninsula Shield Force (the Saudi-led military arm of the Gulf Cooperation Council) to Bahrain at the request of its government to help it defend its constitutional order against a foreign-backed aggression, identified with Iranian forces. Yet, considering what discussed above, what is important to keep in mind is that this potential push towards the regionalization of conflict management, at least in Eurasia, is being undertaken on solidarist and multilateral lines, despite the undeniable prominent role played by Russia. This multilateral discourse of necessity and legitimation is often forgotten; yet it is fundamental to understand the development of these new trends in world politics.

Moreover, exactly because it has developed along multilateral lines and is based on consensus, this solidarity and the negotiated hegemony that derives from it should not be interpreted as blind and unconditional. Solidarism as described above still develops and takes place in a highly politicized realm—one marked by contestation, tensions, historical and present sensitivities,

and strategic differences. It is, in fact, because of this tension that, for example, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan have taken very cautious positions on the conflict over Ukraine. That is to say, they have avoided condemning Russia directly, reaffirmed the indivisibility of Eurasian security, continued to cooperate with Moscow in many areas, advocated for the prevalence of diplomacy and dialogue, and abstained from voting in favor (or, in Uzbekistan's case, not registering a vote) of the recent Western resolution at the UN General Assembly condemning what the Russians call a “special military operation” and what the text calls an “aggression.” Yet, at the same time, they have reiterated their adherence to the fundamental norms of international law and refused to recognize the separatist “people's republics” of Donetsk and Lugansk.

To conclude, it is now clear that the tragic events in Kazakhstan constitute a watershed event in the history of the country. Understanding the origins, causes, and deep impact of the popular discontent there will be of utmost importance to guarantee the sustainable renewal of a more just and equitable social contract between the authorities and the people. Yet, what should also not be forgotten is that in parallel to domestic developments, fundamental regional ones have also taken place, affecting the very meaning of security and sovereignty, and the dynamics of multilateralism in the context of Eurasia. These regional effects, in turn, are very likely to have future important repercussions for the current trajectory of world order and its embedded pluralization. Ignoring them is a mistake; downplaying them is wishful thinking. ^{BD}

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