

Chapter 6

Central Asia's Security Provider and Peacekeeper? Assessing Russia's Role After the US Withdrawal from Afghanistan and Beyond



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6.1 Introduction

The 2021 Russian National Security Strategy authorized by Presidential Decree 400 states that the changing nature of the international system, its norms and rules, produce not only challenges and threats but also opportunities (President Decree 400, 2021). The Russian government has traditionally sought to strengthen its international positions whilst acting upon various international crises. Over the past decades, this has created a space to shape a new reputation and enhance its international influence. In its current vision of national security, the government emphasizes issues of collective security, strategic stability, and multi-beneficial cooperation (President Decree 400, 2021). Non-interference in internal matters and prevention of “colour revolutions” stands out in its domestic and foreign policy. Moreover, Russia reinforces its positions as a security provider for partner states and seeks to further develop cooperation in defence, security, and law enforcement. Countering transnational organized crime, illegal migration, and terrorism in particular is listed among priority tasks home and abroad (President Decree 640, 2016; President Decree Pr-2976, 2014).

The official policies envision the country as an active and capable member of international society, emphasize its mission as a peacekeeper, and see the country

This chapter was written before the Russian ‘special military operation’ started in Ukraine in February 2022. An early version of this paper first appeared in the ISPI Dossier ‘Peacekeeping: The Russian Way.’ Elena Zhirukhina, “*The Afghan Crisis: A Chance to Strengthen Russia’s Security Influence in Central Asia*,” *ispionline.it*, 2021, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/afghan-crisis-chance-strengthen-russias-security-influence-central-asia-32117>.

This chapter uses the terms security provision, peacekeeping and peace enforcement as they appear in the legal and strategic documents of Russia and the CSTO, as well as in their official discourse.

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as tasked with conflict resolution in neighbouring territories. In its legal documents, peacekeeping and peace enforcement are voluntary actions in the framework of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), regional international organizations, and bilateral and multilateral agreements (FL 93, 1995; President Decree 2976, 2014). Peacekeeping and peace enforcement cover measures to engage in monitoring and controlling ceasefire, interposition as a buffer, disarmament and disengagement, refugee assistance, humanitarian aid, security provision in a law enforcement role, and the provision of technical, medical, and logistic assistance among other things (FL 93, 1995). Furthermore, the Kremlin's national security and foreign policy objectives coincide in prioritizing good relations with the post-Soviet states, including in CA, as well as development of regional groupings such as deepening integration via the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and regional cooperation via the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (President Decree 640, 2016).

Russia's CA policy has long relied on pragmatism and flexibility (Laruelle, 2010). Scholars have described a special bond between CA states and their northern neighbour, including via regional groupings which feature "protective integration" that unites states in safeguarding sovereignty and regime security as well as providing political legitimacy (Allison, 2018); Russia's attempts to become 'the system-forming power' in the post-Soviet region (Sakwa, 2010); and the functioning of the CA subregional security complex as part of broader Russian regional security complex (Nygren, 2010). Building strong relations in multiple vectors with CA has been important for Russia but security reasoning has somewhat prevailed as the provision of security assistance to CA has contributed to Moscow's own security against non-traditional threats (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2013). In turn, CA states, to various extents, have looked to the Kremlin as a security provider (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2013) even when it came at the price of increased Russian influence (de Haas, 2017). Russia and the states of Central Asia (CA) enjoy a "natural" long-standing cooperation in fighting irregular threats in the light of shared concerns related to terrorism, extremism, separatism, and transnational organized crime, as well as shared approaches to countering these. The collapse of the Afghan government and the return of the Taliban (FSB, 2021), designated as a terrorist organization by Russia, poses exceptional challenges of instability and uncertainty. Although CA is relatively stable, each country has a history of dealing with terrorist threats, and the risks of domestic and international terrorism long present in the region are particularly acute. With the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, and the entering of a new stage of instability in that country, the CA governments expect potential spill-overs of violence, penetration of borders by terrorist groups, and intensification of transnational criminal activities. Moreover, the civil unrest in Kazakhstan in early 2022 embodied the long-standing fears of "colour revolutions" expressed by regional governments. Mitigating such hazards requires regional cooperation and opens up a window of opportunity for Russia to strengthen its role as a security provider for the CA region and beyond (Davidzon, 2022). It can also help to repair the damage done to Russia's reputation among CA governments by certain foreign policy decisions in

the near abroad, and particularly, by the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Guliyev & Gawrich, 2021; Kropatcheva, 2016).

This chapter highlights and contextualizes Russia's pragmatic and assertive security actions in CA after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. These are consistent with the Kremlin's long vision of its regional and global role as security provider and peacekeeper. Russia seems to fully utilize the opportunity to project itself as reliable partner for CA regimes and demonstrate a more active security standing in the region, both in bilateral cooperation and in multilateral format via regional groupings. International regional organizations such as the Russia-led CSTO and the Russia- and China-led SCO can now also demonstrate their practical relevance to CA.

6.2 Russia's Bilateral Security Cooperation with Central Asia's Partners

Russia's internal and external policy, has developed an extensive counterterrorist expertise by confronting domestic terrorist threats, including in the North Caucasus. Considering this, Russia has claimed its capacity to export this expertise in the years following 9/11, indicated security provision as an important foreign policy objective, and promoted its expertise in counterterrorist interventions abroad—most recently in Russia's military campaign in Syria. Such interventions, especially in Syria, have allowed Russia to train personnel in counterterrorist operations and to test new military equipment and weaponry, and could prove useful in training Russia's CA partners to face a potential spill-over from Afghanistan. Russia visibly intensified its bilateral and multilateral military cooperation with the CA states in readiness for the consequences of the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in 2021.

For instance, in August 2021 Russia conducted a joint military training exercise with Uzbekistan (Sputnik, 2021) at the Uzbek border with Afghanistan, involving over 1,500 personnel, as well as another with both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (CIS, 2021) at the Tajik section of the Afghan border, engaging over 2,500 personnel and military aviation. Joint exercises aimed at protecting state borders and targeting adversaries from the air heavily relied on Russia's Syrian experience (Izvestia, n.d.). These were in addition to the regular military exercises that Russia holds at its military bases in Central Asia. For example, large military trainings at the 201st Russian military base in Tajikistan, aimed at improving coordination and targeting illegal armed groups breaking through the state border, took place in November 2021 (TASS, 2021) and January 2022 (RIA, 2022b). Recent aviation training occurred at the Russian military base in Kyrgyzstan in January 2022 (24KG, 2022).

Moreover, the unfolding crisis in Afghanistan has served as a legitimate and welcome pretext to strengthen and better equip Russian military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Claiming that the large 201st military base in Tajikistan is "a guarantor of stability on the southern borders of the CSTO" (*Russia Today*, 2021), it received

new antitank missile systems to target armoured vehicles, helicopters and drones, as well as firearms and portable anti-aircraft missile systems (DW, 2021). In 2020, the military base in Kyrgyzstan was equipped with military drones of small and medium coverage employed in intelligence gathering and armed combat (Azattyk, 2020).

Additionally, the Afghan factor has increased the value of the Russian military presence for its local hosts and reinforced Russia's position as a security guarantor and a loyal partner. Russia's proactive standing in CA serves to reach a number of key objectives, including improving Russia's position in CA, ensuring the security of the regional borders against diffusion of political violence and drug trafficking, and dealing remotely against Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State which are both designated as terrorist by Russia (FSB, 2021). Progress on these objectives can be made also through regional organizations, like the CSTO and the SCO.

6.2.1 Cooperation Under the Collective Security Treaty Organization Framework

The CSTO promotes the agenda of regional security and stability, territorial integrity, and sovereignty, and ways of countering terrorism and extremism, and illicit trafficking in drugs and weapons (CSTO, 2002). Its guiding principles include independence, voluntary participation, equality, and non-interference in the internal affairs of its member states (CSTO, 2002), and most importantly, the principle of collective self-defence. Collective self-defence activates in case of aggression against a member state defined as “an armed attack menacing to safety, stability, territorial integrity, and sovereignty” or a threat thereof and presupposes a joint response ranging from consultations to military assistance at request of a member state (CSTO, 1992). Three out of the five CA states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—are members.

Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan—the two remaining CA countries—have bilateral agreements with Russia covering strategic partnership and military cooperation. Tashkent and Moscow agreed upon a number of dimensions in security cooperation, including military and military-technological cooperation such as arms trade and supplies, staff training and research, military drills (FL 30, 2001), and military technical assistance (FL 67, 2017). They also developed strategic partnership to ensure regional security through political consultations, cooperation, and coordination between national responsible agencies to fight non-traditional threats (FL 180, 2004). Most importantly, these two states agreed upon the use of armed forces in the interest of security (FL 30, 2001). The use of armed forces beyond the territory of both states shall be in compliance with the UN Charter and international and national law (FL 30, 2001). Uzbekistan and Russia went as far as accepting a collective security principle in case of aggression by a third state or group of states against either of them according to article 51 of the UN Charter (FL 64, 2006).

The nature of the security arrangements between Turkmenistan and Russia is different in consideration of Turkmenistan's status of neutrality (FL 135, 2002).

Ashgabat and Moscow restricted cooperation to promises not to harm each other, committing not to allow the use of the territory of one state by third parties against the other, and political negotiations and consultations as security risks emerge (FL 135, 2002). The two countries agreed *inter alia* to coordinate their fight against non-traditional threats such as domestic and international terrorism and transnational organized crime (FL 135, 2002; FL 355, 2020).

Russia sees the CSTO as a major instrument of ensuring collective security provision in the post-Soviet space (President Decree 640, 2016; President Decree Pr-2976, 2014). It also helps to communicate Moscow's role as a security provider for the CA region (Allison, 2008). Being the driving force of the CSTO does not imply, however, that the organization can be used solely as a Russian instrument (Sakwa, 2010). Neither does it mean that Russian foreign policy decisions are automatically supported by the CSTO member states who have positioned themselves rather cautiously in cases related to the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in another former Soviet Republic, namely Georgia, as independent states, or the Crimean peninsula as part of Russia (Davidzon, 2022). Russia, nevertheless, employs the CSTO to reach a set of regional objectives in strengthening the country's power grip, deepening its influence, and channelling Russian national political, economic, and military interests in CA (Kropatcheva, 2016).

As stated in Russian strategic documents, as well as is evident from recent regional practice, Russia has sought to enhance the CSTO's military capabilities and diversify its functions in Central Asia (President Decree 640, 2016; President Decree Pr-2976, 2014). One such dimension has been in peacekeeping. The emergence of the CSTO's peacekeeping function dates to 2004 when the organization developed a vision for peacekeeping in the respective Concept (CSTO, 2004), and to 2007 when the Peacekeeping Agreement was signed (CSTO, 2007). From its onset, CSTO peacekeeping was aimed at serving as an early warning system for the resolution of emerging conflicts as well as an instrument to promote political and military approaches and the interests of the CSTO and its member states (CSTO, 2004). In line with the scope of identified threats, the CSTO envisioned the confrontation of terrorist groups, illegal armed groups, and sabotage groups in its peacekeeping operations.

As stated in the CSTO documents, peacekeeping operations shall be authorized by the decision of the CSTO at the request of a member state for the resolution of a conflict on its territory or based on a UNSC decision beyond the CSTO area (CSTO, 2007). Thus far, no official peacekeeping mission has been taken place beyond its area of responsibility. The UNSC must be informed about planned peacekeeping operations in a CSTO member state or called upon to authorize such an operation in a third country (CSTO, 2007). The organization has used its peacekeeping forces only once so far: in Kazakhstan—within “the area of CSTO responsibility”—and never beyond it.

To implement military its ambitions, the CSTO required trained personnel, equipment, and coordination. In recent years, the CSTO has developed its military capabilities. With 20,000 personnel in its Collective Rapid Reaction Forces, 5,000 in the Collective Rapid Deployment Forces, and a peacekeeping force of 3,000 military and 600 law enforcement personnel, the CSTO seems to have accumulated the means

to mitigate regional challenges. In 2021, the organization significantly intensified its activities in the CA region, particularly in Tajikistan, in response to the situation in Afghanistan. Later, in early 2022, during the civil domestic unrest and revolts in Kazakhstan, it took the unprecedented step of sending approximately 2,500 troops into a member country.

6.3 Response to the Crisis in Afghanistan

The unfolding takeover of the Taliban and subsequent crisis in Afghanistan has, to a large extent, shaped the CSTO's agenda in CA. The CSTO declared that the organization plans to use its full capabilities to protect its member states from the diffusion of violence from Afghanistan to CA, as well as from penetration of terrorist groups and criminal networks (CSTO, 2021b, 2021e). This does not mean, however, going to war with Afghanistan. Hence, no interventions are envisaged beyond the borders of the CSTO member states (CSTO, 2021f; Interfax, 2021). Ensuring the border security of, foremost, Tajikistan and, of course, other member states has presented itself as priority mission (CSTO, 2021f). Indeed, the CSTO enhanced its collective preparedness by organizing collective training at the political and operational levels. The CSTO conducted several rounds of an Afghanistan-themed business game aimed at developing collective political and military response to normalize the situation (CSTO, 2021a). In September 2021, the organization implemented the final stage of the joint counterterrorist training under the title "Rubezh-2021" in Kyrgyzstan aimed at eliminating an illegal invasion of armed groups into a CSTO country (CSTO, 2021d). Another joint training mission "Thunder-2021" took place later that month in Armenia, in the Caucasus, focusing on anti-drug operations in mountainous terrain (CSTO, 2021i). Many more such initiatives and joint manoeuvres followed, and by late October 2021, Tajikistan hosted the massive "Combat Brotherhood-2021," a joint strategic and operational military drill that involved over 4,000 personnel and 500 military vehicles (CSTO, 2021h). This drill combined three separate military training exercises: "Echelon-2021" which focused on providing logistical support to a military operation; "Search-2021" which was tasked with gathering, analysing, and sharing intelligence to be later used in fighting an adversary; and "Interaction-2021" which was aimed at evacuating civilians, engaging with adversary groups, and restoring control over a state border (CSTO, 2021j). In November 2021, the CSTO held yet another tactical training in Tajikistan, named "Cobalt-2021" and focused on securing border areas and liquidating illegal armed groups. It brought together special police regiments, interior forces, national guards, drug control agencies, border guards, and military personnel (CSTO, 2021c, 2021g). A rather active autumn ended with exercise "Unbreakable Brotherhood-2021," conducted in November 2021 in Kazan, Russia; it engaged over 1,800 personnel and 300 vehicles. Building on Russian experience earned in Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh, participants practiced various assignments associated with peacekeeping operations, including hostage release, and humanitarian and refugee assistance (CSTO, 2021i, 2021k).

The CSTO emphasized the development of peacekeeping as a priority dimension of collective security, to be soon performed in Kazakhstan.

6.4 The 2022 Response to the Crisis in Kazakhstan

Early 2022 was marked by civil unrest in Kazakhstan which began as protests over doubled fuel prices in Zhanaozen. These further spread countrywide, combining economic and political demands. The government claims that the involvement of “terrorist” groups turned it violent. While the nature of the events requires further investigation, it is evident that the situation quickly spiralled out of control, featuring attacks on governmental buildings and critical infrastructure, the burning of cars, and looting. President Tokayev requested CSTO assistance in restoring internal order by framing the events as “foreign aggression,” an “attack of international terrorists trained abroad,” and an “attempt at coup d'état” (RBC, 2022b). Recalling article 4 of the Treaty (CSTO, 1992), the CSTO responded urgently and, within days, had deployed 2,500 peacekeepers to guard key infrastructure and support Kazakh law enforcement (Lenta, 2022).

The CSTO's first ever mission presents an important development as the CSTO had often been criticized for failures to engage (Allison, 2018; Guliyev & Gawrich, 2021; Kropatcheva, 2016) and ineffectiveness (Davidzon, 2022). Even after having been asked to do so by its member states, the CSTO had avoided deploying military forces within its area of responsibility until 2022, referring to either the lack of necessity or non-applicability of its mandate (Cooley, 2022). The CSTO's reluctance to participate in multiple regional conflicts can be linked to several factors. First, difficulties in reaching consensus among member states regarding conflict situations blocked the CSTO involvement. Second, Russia's policy preferences had a direct impact on its decision-making; at times Russia lacked the interest to engage (Kropatcheva, 2016) and at others the specific geopolitical context suggested that Russia would perform best as a solo player in peacekeeping. Hence, the CSTO forces as an instrument were not used.

Nevertheless, the potential to do so has always been there. A broad approach to what constitutes terrorism and extremism, as well as external interference, left room for connecting the actions of domestic groups found to threaten stability, integrity, or sovereignty to the CSTO mandate to intervene (Allison, 2008). Although the CSTO invested in disassociating itself from interference in domestic matters in discourse and in practice (Allison, 2008), this opportunity remained open and was finally employed in Kazakhstan.

The events in Kazakhstan prompted a reaction that will likely change the CSTO's reputation and future actions. In addition to the recognition of Kazakhstan's explicit appeal for external support, the decision to deploy a peacekeeping mission can be explained via the following reasoning.

First, Russia could not risk instability in Kazakhstan, a country that shares with the Russian Federation the world's longest uninterrupted land border. Destabilization of

Kazakhstan would have been disastrous, especially considering the growing tension at the other Russian border, the border with Ukraine, and prospect of escalation there.

Second, Kazakhstan has been Russia's strategic partner for years. Their economies are naturally interlinked (Laruelle et al., 2019), particularly within the regional integration project of the EAEU. Losing these economic ties could lead to unpredictable consequences as popular uprisings in the post-Soviet space proved able to cause trouble for the Russian political and economic interests.

Third, violent protests in Kazakhstan fed the Russian government's own fears, widely shared by CA governments, of uncontrolled social movements and "colour revolutions" (Allison, 2008).

Fourth, it was strategically important for the mission to be perceived as a CSTO multinational peacekeeping mission rather than a Russian intervention. Russia's contribution, although kept confidential, could be calculated as most of the 2500 men sent to Kazakhstan. Armenia deployed 100 (RBC, 2022a), Kyrgyzstan 150 (RIA, 2022a), Tajikistan 200 (RIA, 2022c), and Belarus an estimated 100 soldiers. The multinational nature of the CSTO peacekeepers, nevertheless, contributed to diverting attention from the long-standing anxiety surrounding potential Russian interference in Kazakhstan's domestic matters connected to the large Russian minority in the north of the country (Laruelle et al., 2019) which was particularly pronounced after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Kropatcheva, 2016).

Fifth, as a side effect, the peacekeeping mission had the potential to act as a reminder to the government of Kazakhstan that Russia and allies had helped in time of crisis and might, to a certain extent, be counted on to shift priorities towards Russia in Kazakhstan's multi-vector policy.

The CSTO peacekeeping mission in Kazakhstan opened a new chapter for the organization. It signalled the readiness of the organization to operate not only as a political platform that limits its use of military and law enforcement force to joint drills. Significant aspects of the mission were its short-term length, from the 6 to 19 of January 2022, and the immediate return of personnel to home countries upon its termination. This demonstrated to the member states and other interested stakeholders that the organization can be trusted to leave once the job is done.

6.5 Cooperation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Framework

The SCO, founded in 2001 and in which four out of five CA states are members alongside Russia and China, aims to ensure peace, stability, and security, as well as good neighbourliness and multi-dimensional cooperation (SCO, 2002). Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan cooperate under the framework of the SCO, and thus present another priority task for Russia (President Decree 640, 2016; President Decree Pr-2976, 2014). The multilateralism of the SCO provides better chances

for CA states to channel their national interests (de Haas, 2017). Moreover, CA represents “the heart of the SCO,” and hence, the organization prioritizes CA’s needs in security and development (Norov, 2021). Created on the principles of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, respect for sovereignty and independence, non-interference in internal affairs, and non-aggression and non-use of force, the SCO was envisioned to primarily be a political platform allowing for the negotiation of joint approaches and coordination of actions that are security related in the region (SCO, 2002). Countering terrorism, separatism, and extremism stand out among the SCO areas of interest, manifest in both the SCO Charter (SCO, 2002) and Convention (SCO, 2001) on combating terrorism, separatism, and extremism, and implemented through the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS).

Fighting “three evils” occurs by means of information sharing, the development and implementation of measures to prevent, identify, and suppress these “evils,” and by means of capacity building measures for competent authorities of member states (SCO, 2001). Afghanistan, which has observer status but failed to become a member of the SCO, today poses the risks of exporting instability, terrorism, and drugs and, thus, is a natural agenda item for this organization, especially so after the launch of the process of Iran’s accession (Norov, 2021) as a member. Following Iran’s accession, all of Afghanistan’s neighbours with the exception of Turkmenistan will be members of the SCO. The crisis in Afghanistan is thus of grave concern for the SCO’s CA members, especially for Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. As of the time of writing, the SCO approach to mitigating the crisis is aligned with its mandate and cannot go beyond political efforts, including via the SCO-Afghanistan contact group, and preventive and capacity building measures (SCO, 2021a). The organization positions itself as a platform for cooperation and dialogue and cannot be perceived or used for confrontation (Norov, 2021). As discussed at its Summit in September 2021, the SCO sees its role in developing coordinated policies towards Afghanistan via the organization of humanitarian relief, support for an inclusive peace process, and the blocking of terrorism, drugs, and violence from crossing international borders (SCO, 2021b). Russia plans to be very active in that regard (Putin, 2021). To that cause, in September 2021, the SCO organized the antiterrorist training exercise “Peaceful Mission 2021,” aimed at containing spill-over of terrorism from Afghanistan and held in the Orenburg region of Russia with the participation of military from Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Belarus (Lavrov, 2021). When it came to the events in Kazakhstan in early 2022, SCO reaction was limited to expressions of concerns regarding destabilization, trust in the government of Kazakhstan to restore internal order with the help of the CSTO, and offering RATS assistance upon request (TASS, 2022).

6.6 Conclusion

Although Russia still faces competition from US security assistance initiatives and EU-led security projects, Russia’s increasing involvement in capacity-building

measures to counter irregular adversaries is evident in CA. Russia began using emerging opportunities to strengthen security cooperation with CA governments and reclaim its leadership role in the region long before the 2021 crisis year. Russia seeks to portray itself as a reliable partner available in times of need. As the CSTO Secretary General, in commenting on “Combat Brotherhood-2021,” declared, “the CSTO collective forces demonstrated to the whole world, including our adversaries, that Tajikistan is well protected and will never be left alone facing threats” (CSTO, 2021f).

Containing the diffusion of the 2021 crisis in Afghanistan to its borders and the reaction towards regional instability will test not only operational capacity but also CA states’ abilities to negotiate a joint response among themselves and with the Russian government, as well as to act as a united political front through regional organizations like the CSTO and the SCO.

As Russia seeks to enhance its reputation as a security provider in Central Asia and beyond, one of the instruments at hand to implement this objective is the authorization of the use of its forces in peacekeeping operations. The Russian government has not only advanced its role via military operations such as in Syria, and promoted itself as a regional peacekeeper in solo missions such as in Nagorno-Karabakh, but has finally used the Russia-led CSTO mechanism, activating its “peacekeeping potential” in Kazakhstan.

Indeed, the CSTO peacekeeping mission in Kazakhstan opened a new chapter for the organization. The CSTO demonstrated that it can be trusted to deploy forces, efficiently implement the mission, and leave. These actions support Russia’s regional security and foreign policy objectives as well as those of the CSTO. They create a path towards a more established global standing; the CSTO has long envisioned its involvement in UN peacekeeping worldwide.

By engaging in resolving conflicts and performing peacekeeping functions, by investing in multiple military drills, as well as security and law enforcement training via bilateral and multilateral mechanisms, Russia signals its military capacity and capabilities, and efficiency and speed of operations. Power demonstration becomes useful as risks of conflict escalation emerge close to Russian borders. Furthermore, well justified security cooperation in CA over the crises in Afghanistan and Kazakhstan serves a communicative purpose in the face of growing tensions over Ukraine.

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