

Uzbekistan withdraws from the CSTO once again

Marek Matusiak

On 20 June, Uzbekistan sent a note to the secretariat of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), informing them that it was suspending its membership of this body. This is the second time in the history of Uzbekistan's membership of the CSTO that it has done so (the previous period of suspension ran from 1999 to 2006). Yet even after 2006, Uzbekistan did not participate in the CSTO's initiatives in full; it did not participate in military exercises or support the formation of rapid reaction forces, and in many cases, it openly contested the Organisation's Russian-dominated policy (for example, in 2009 it opposed the opening of a Russian military base under the aegis of the CSTO in southern Kyrgyzstan, near the Uzbek border).

Commentary

- Uzbekistan's decision should be interpreted as an expression of Tashkent's dissatisfaction with Russian policies, especially the pressure from Moscow for greater coordination of CSTO member states in foreign policy (which would actually mean greater control by Russia), as well as efforts to strengthen security cooperation. One initiative which Tashkent objects to, for example, is the possibility of CSTO rapid reaction forces intervening in member states in case of internal threats to their stability, a move which is being considered in the context of the Organisation. Withdrawal from the CSTO also demonstrates Uzbekistan's unique position as compared to the other states in the region, as well as its ambitions to conduct an independent foreign and security policy.

- Withdrawal from the CSTO gives Tashkent room for manoeuvre in its cooperation with the West (primarily the US) in the context of Afghanistan. Uzbekistan is a key partner of the United States and NATO, both as a transit country in the Northern Distribution Network for the coalition forces in Afghanistan, and as a factor stabilising the situation in the country (for example, as a source of electricity for Kabul and parts of northern Afghanistan). In the light of the withdrawal of coalition forces planned for 2014, we should expect relations between Uzbekistan and the West to intensify further. Withdrawal from the CSTO will allow Tashkent to cooperate with the US and NATO without the need to agree terms with the members of the Organisation, especially Russia. Uzbekistan is counting not only on financial gain (from transit fees, for example), but also on major benefits in terms of security, such as

the transfer of weapons from the withdrawing forces, or – as has been speculated – the possibility of a permanent American presence on its territory. Yet the previous history of Tashkent's foreign policy and its pendulum-like nature (one minute Tashkent moves closer to the West, and the next it improves its relations with Moscow) indicates that the current pro-Western turn could merely be tactical in nature, and does not mean it will last.

- Tashkent's withdrawal from the CSTO is not a surprise, given the rather formal nature of its previous membership. This move demonstrates however the failure of Russian policy in Central Asia, especially as President Putin had paid a visit to Tashkent only a few weeks previously. The decision by Uzbekistan – the most populous country in Central Asia, with one of the largest armies in terms of numbers within the Organisation – weakens the CSTO's position in the international arena, and is a blow to Moscow's efforts to make it a partner for NATO. Tashkent's policy also strikes at Russia's regional authority, and could encourage smaller countries such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to seek greater independence from Moscow. In this situation, we can expect an increase in tension (at both official and unofficial levels) in relations between Moscow and Tashkent.

With assistance from Józef Lang