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Dedicated to my parents.

*Your steadfast love, resilience, and
example have been my compass.*

*I am forever grateful for the
opportunities you created and the
strength you nurtured within me.*

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABM	Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty
AEW	Air Expeditionary Wing
AP	Associated Press
BATNA	Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement
BMD / MD	Ballistic/strategic missile defense
BOMCA	Border Management Programme in Central Asia
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
C2	Command and Control
CAR CRDF	Central Asian region's Collective Rapid Deployment Forces
CDM	Council of Defense Ministers
CEPA	Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement
CFM	Council of Foreign Ministers.
CFSP / CSDP	Common Foreign and Security Policy / Common Security and Defence Policy of the EU (legal base for EUMA).
CHS (SCO)	Council of Heads of State
CiO	Chairperson-in-Office of the OSCE
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States.
CPR	Common-Pool Resources.
CRDF / KSBR	Collective Rapid Deployment Forces (Kollektivnyye Sily Bystrogo Razvortyvaniya)
CRRF / KSOR	Collective Rapid Reaction Forces (Kollektivnyye Sily Operativnogo Reagirovaniya)
CSC	Collective Security Council
CSCE	Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe
CSSC	Committee of Secretaries of Security Councils
CST	Collective Security Treaty
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization.

DEEP	Defence Education Enhancement Programme
DPKO	UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations
DTM	Displacement Tracking Matrix
EAEU/EEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EAPC	Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council
EEAS	European External Action Service
EU	European Union.
EUMA	European Union Mission in Armenia (civilian CSDP mission under CFSP).
FFIT	Fact-Finding Investigation Team (ICAO team investigating FR4978).
FIIA	Finnish Institute of International Affairs
FR4978	The Ryanair flight diverted over Belarusian airspace on 23 May 2021
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GUAM	Organization for Democracy and Economic Development
HQ	Headquarters.
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICAO	International Civil Aviation Organization (FR4978 Fact-Finding Investigation).
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICG	International Crisis Group
ICMPD	International Centre for Migration Policy Development
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.
IPAP	Individual Partnership Action Plan
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance

ITPP	Individually Tailored Partnership Programme
JAF	High Command of the Joint Armed Forces
KFOR	Kosovo Force
MK	Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base, Romania
MoD	Ministry of Defence
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding (SCO–CSTO, 2007).
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NRC	NATO–Russia Council
OCC	Operational Capabilities Concept
OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODIHR	OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
OJ	Official Journal of the European Union
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
OSW	Centre for Eastern Studies (Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, Polsha)
OTS	Organization of Turkic States
PACSTO	Parliamentary Assembly of the CSTO
PARP	Planning and Review Process
PC	Permanent Council
PF	Peacekeeping Forces
PfP	Partnership for Peace
PLA	People’s Liberation Army
RATS	Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure
RFE/RL	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
SG	Secretary-General
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SOFA	Status of Forces Agreement
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure

U.S.	United States
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNOCT	UN Office of Counter-Terrorism
USIP	United States Institute of Peace
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WPR	Water Pipeline Route
ZOPA	Zone of Possible Agreement

INTRODUCTION:
**THE CSTO'S PARADOX OF FORMAL STRENGTH
AND POLITICAL FRAGILITY**

The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is, on paper, a robust alliance. It fields rapid-reaction formations and a peacekeeping component, has routinized exercise series, and has even built legal pathways to operate under UN umbrellas – symbols of organizational maturity that should, in principle, translate into credible collective security. Yet when crises inside its neighborhood bite, the record is uneven: rapid activation in Kazakhstan (January 2022) sits alongside restraint during the Belarus crisis and the Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan border escalations, and a conspicuous credibility gap in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. The central puzzle of this thesis is therefore straightforward: why does a formally strong alliance so often appear politically fragile?

Background: The CSTO in the evolving post-Soviet security landscape

After the Soviet collapse, Eurasian security did not evolve toward supranational pooling so much as toward regionalism as statecraft – a set of diplomatic formats that stabilized order among unequal actors by converting material leverage into procedures, venues, and rituals. In this architecture, Moscow sought recognized primacy; smaller states sought shelter, resources, and status without overtly capitulating to unilateral diktat. The result was a negotiated hierarchy: formal consensus and scripted multilateralism on the surface, patronage-for-loyalty bargains underneath (arms pricing, training pipelines, basing access, and exercise prestige). This is the texture of the CSTO that Chapter 1 reconstructs from classical realism, hegemonic-stability reasoning, and asymmetry theory.

Two design features are especially consequential. First, consensus and limited-format decision rules let members perform unity while avoiding legal exposure to every output – lowering the reputational cost of deference and keeping vetoes mostly backstage. Second, Article 7's consultation clause – later operationalized by the December 2011 “mutual consent” expectation on new foreign bases – turned third-party military access into a club-governed issue, a visible test of loyalty and a lever for gatekeeping. These

are not empty formalities; they embed hierarchy by structuring where decisions are taken and at what price dissent is voiced.

Externally, the CSTO's long-running quest for recognition as a peer interlocutor collided with NATO's consistent preference for bilateral channels and the NATO–Russia Council framework. Especially after 2014, when Allied policy suspended “practical cooperation” with Russia, bloc-to-bloc engagement became politically unavailable by construction – pushing the CSTO inward and reinforcing its role as a signaling platform rather than a partner. Afghanistan logistics crystallized the logic: NATO “vetoed the venue,” handling access via states and neutral umbrellas, while the CSTO accumulated procedural badges (UN language, peacekeeping MoUs) to argue capacity and equivalence.

Problem statement

This dissertation addresses the paradox of form and practice: an alliance with recognizable instruments of collective action (rapid forces, peacekeeping pathways, codified access rules) that does not deliver consistent collective-security outputs across crisis types. The claim advanced here is that the CSTO's formal strength primarily serves hierarchy management and regime stability, and that the organization's political fragility emerges when those priorities collide with members' expectations of protection or neutral mediation.

Research questions

1. **Institutional design and hegemony.** How does the CSTO's inherited post-Soviet design entrench Russian primacy and reproduce asymmetrical power dynamics? (Focus: consensus/limited-format rules; access gatekeeping; inducements.)
2. **Theoretical lenses.** Through which frameworks – Neorealism and Asymmetrical Alliance Theory – can we best explain member behavior and decision-making inside the CSTO? (Focus: side-payments, status signaling, autonomy/deference equilibria.)

3. **Crisis practice.** How do asymmetrical relations manifest in the CSTO's responses to concrete challenges – Nagorno-Karabakh 2020, Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan border escalations, Belarus 2020–, and Kazakhstan 2022 – and what patterns separate activation from restraint?
4. **External shaping.** To what extent is the CSTO's trajectory conditioned by **external actors (the West, China) and system-level shocks** (notably the post-2014 order and the war in Ukraine), particularly via recognition politics and venue control?

Methodology: qualitative comparative case study

The thesis uses a **qualitative comparative case study** design with process-tracing inside each episode and structured, focused comparison across cases. Evidence comes from official primary records (CSTO communiqués and chair statements; OSCE Permanent Council transcripts and CiO/SG statements; UNGA resolutions and UN briefings; ICAO investigative reports; the November 2020 South Caucasus trilateral statement; Kremlin releases) and peer-reviewed/analytic literature already established in Chapter 1 (Cooley; Womack; Weitz), privileging verifiable documents over commentary. Case selection spans distinct crisis types: (i) an interstate conflict with a non-member belligerent (Karabakh 2020); (ii) intra-CSTO border violence (Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan); and (iii) domestic regime crises with regional reverberations (Belarus; Kazakhstan). The aim is to test whether identical treaty language and instruments yield systematic or selective collective-security effects when incentives and optics vary.

Analytically, the study operationalizes collective security as timely, rules-based protection of a member's security and sovereignty – via deterrent diplomacy, peacekeeping, or enforceable guarantees – while selective intervention denotes contingent activation aligned with patron–client priorities or regime-security frames. Coding follows the documents' categories (e.g., explicit Article-4 invocations; external-threat framings; requests/authorizations) and triangulates outcomes against observable deployments, withdrawals, and declared mandates.

Scope and limitations: Three caveats structure inference. **First**, the study relies on public documentation; it does not access closed minutes or classified tasking, so some bargaining signals are necessarily read through official language and observed behavior (deployment timing, formats used, venues chosen). **Second**, the analysis is institution-centric: it focuses on what can be attributed to the CSTO’s rules and repertoire rather than reconstructing full domestic politics in each capital. **Third**, the post-2014 environment and the war in Ukraine reshape reputational costs for all actors; claims are therefore bounded to what the record shows for the examined period and do not assume continuity beyond documentary support. These limitations are mitigated by triangulating across organizations (CSTO/OSCE/UN/ICAO), by explicit case-type variation, and by restricting generalizations to documented practice.

Thesis structure

Chapter 1 develops the conceptual scaffolding. It situates the CSTO within post-Soviet regionalism, shows how procedures (consensus; limited-format decisions) and access governance (Article 7; 2011 mutual-consent move) embed hierarchy, and explains how patronage instruments (arms pricing, training, basing, CRRF/peacekeeping formats) stabilize an autonomy–deference equilibrium.

Chapter 2 “tests the limits of collective security” across Karabakh 2020, Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan border crises, Belarus 2020–, and Kazakhstan 2022, showing where the organization activated, where it abstained, and how threat framing and audience costs shaped choices.

Chapter 3 moves to the external arena – **NATO** and the **SCO** – to show how recognition politics and venue control produce managed parallelism rather than negotiated cooperation; it derives a pragmatic agenda for “managed rivalry” that separates status from coordination under neutral umbrellas.

The Conclusion brings the argument back to the paradox. It consolidates findings on design-driven selectivity, revisits how the Ukraine war hardens identity constraints, and sets out implications for how scholars and practitioners should read “collective security” inside asymmetric alliances – less as automatic mutual aid, more as negotiated hierarchy maintenance under audience-sensitive diplomacy.

CHAPTER 1:

FOUNDATIONS OF ASYMMETRY:

INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN & PATRONAGE DIPLOMACY

1.1 Regional Order as Statecraft: Classical Realism and Hegemonic Stability in the Post-Soviet Space

1.1.1 From Security Vacuum to Regionalism as Statecraft

The Soviet collapse erased a vertically integrated security and governance system across Eurasia and left newly independent states to improvise institutions in the midst of unresolved territorial disputes, fragile borders, and transnational risks. What emerged in the early 2000s was not an EU-style pooling of sovereignty but a pragmatic turn to regionalism as statecraft, where formats were designed to steady regimes, manage hard security challenges, and re-embed the strongest regional power at the center of coordination (Cooley, 2012, Davidzon, 2022).

Two background conditions pushed regionalism in this direction. First, post-imperial interdependence remained dense: pipelines, electricity grids, railways and defense networks were built for a single union, while Russian remained the lingua franca of technocracies and elites. These “post-imperial bonds” constituted ready-made channels through which Moscow could re-engage (Cooley, 2012, p. 52). Second, the late-1990s and early-2000s threat agenda – Taliban advances, IMU incursions into Kyrgyzstan’s Batken region, and spillovers from Afghanistan – created a focal point for coordination under a security idiom legible to all capitals (Cooley, 2012, Davidzon, 2022).

Crucially, this Eurasian regionalism matured as an instrument of diplomacy, not as supranational delegation. The Russian presidency intensified elite-to-elite management – including creating a Kremlin office to coordinate inter-elite ties – and introduced architectures to centralize security conversations with Central Asian leaders (Trenin, 2007, p. 125). On the organizational side, Moscow helped shape a ladder of formats – CIS remnants, a CSTO built out of the 1990s Tashkent Treaty, and later “rapid reaction” and peacekeeping instruments – whose logics were explicitly framed

around hard-security provision and regime steadiness, not supranational pooling (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024; Davidzon, 2022; Cooley, 2012).

Within this architecture, regionalism functioned as negotiated order-building. Member governments sought shelter and resources for internal stability; Russia sought a recognized primacy consistent with its great-power identity. In Cooley's formulation, Moscow's approach to Central Asia pursued a "basket of different objectives," – counter-terrorism cooperation, energy access, political stability, a common economic space, citizens' protection – submerged beneath an overriding quest for regional primacy and "privileged influence" (Cooley, 2012, p. 51). Those aims are social and diplomatic – they rely on recognition, status and deference rather than on annexation – so they are necessarily negotiated vis-à-vis other powers and local elites (Cooley, 2012).

Finally, regional design reflected the competitive environment. While Moscow periodically pushed to present CSTO as a partner for NATO on Afghanistan, Western officials preferred bilateralism and avoided legitimizing a Russian-led bloc (Cooley, 2012). That denial of organizational recognition reinforced the inward-facing and regime-security focus of Eurasian security regionalism (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024).

The post-Soviet case shows regionalism as statecraft: it is a diplomatic technology for stabilizing order among unequal actors, rather than a teleological path to supranationality. The rest of 1.1 shows how classical realism and hegemonic-stability reasoning illuminate that diplomatic technology, and how everyday negotiation – through side-payments, agenda framing, and recognition contests – locks the design into practice.

1.1.2 Classical Realism in Practice: Patronage, Prestige, and Status-Seeking

Diplomacy

Classical realism expects leaders to manage insecurity with prudence, to husband influence, and to convert material instruments into prestige, status and deference. Cooley's account of the 2000s shows Moscow operating in exactly that register: it did not always pursue a coherent imperial blueprint; instead it built leverage by flexibly linking issues, sequencing inducements, and using status signals in its dealings with both Central Asian rulers and Western partners (Cooley, 2012).

First, post-9/11 opportunistic cooperation as status play. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the Kremlin authorized intelligence sharing, overflight corridors, and did not veto (indeed tolerated) temporary U.S. basing on Central Asian soil as part of the Afghanistan campaign. That stance exploited a window where cooperation with Washington could raise Russia's international standing and help reframe Chechnya under a broader "war on terror" semantics (Cooley, 2012, pp. 51–55). Diplomatically, this was issue-linkage par excellence: by making itself an enabler, Moscow sought recognition as the regional interlocutor of first resort for Central Asia (Cooley, 2012).

Second, recalibration as relations deteriorated. U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, NATO's enlargement to the Baltic states, the Iraq war, and the "Color Revolutions" eroded the brief cooperative equilibrium and re-zero-summed Central Asia (Cooley, 2012, pp. 54–55). In response, the Kremlin pivoted from a permissive posture to competitive status defense, pressing to curtail U.S. access after 2005 and foregrounding CSTO-centric solutions in the rhetoric of "order" and "counter-terrorism" (Cooley, 2012).

Third, elite-to-elite management and patronage channels. Realist prudence favors instruments that minimize transaction costs with ruling circles. From 1999–2000 the presidency increased leader-level contacts and created a new Kremlin office specifically to manage inter-elite ties, which functioned as diplomatic pipelines for side-payments, security guarantees, and policy coordination (Cooley, 2012). Materially, Moscow's post-imperial bonds – shared language, education, and security-service training; migrant labor to Russia; and extensive media reach – made patronage diplomacy cheap and legible for recipients (Cooley, 2012).

Fourth, bargaining through layered inducements. With the institutionalization of the CSTO in 2002–2003, Russia paired status appeals with tangible inducements: the founding bargain allowed members to buy Russian arms at domestic prices and committed Moscow to cover organizational costs – classic side-payments that lower the price of alignment (Cooley, 2012). The Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF), agreed in 2009, then signaled capacity and reassurance to leaders facing internal shocks (Davidzon, 2022).

In short, under classical-realist expectations Russia’s diplomacy of prudence is visible in (a) opportunity capture (post-9/11), (b) status-defense pivots as the environment changes, (c) elite-centric management, and (d) calibrated side-payments. Each of these is a negotiated move that invites the deference of neighbors without demanding formal sovereignty concessions.

1.1.3 Hegemonic Stability in Eurasian Security: Public-Goods Provision, Side-Payments, and Organizational Form

Hegemonic-stability reasoning helps explain why Eurasian security regionalism could be both cooperative and hierarchical. A dominant actor can stabilize a region by providing public goods (security, coordination platforms), and it can maintain leadership by pricing loyalty through side-payments and by using rules that channel rather than constrain its primacy. The CSTO’s emergence, instruments, and procedures map tightly onto that logic.

The CSTO, formed in 2002 and chartered in 2003, adopted a unified command and rotating presidency and pledged force integration – forms familiar from successful Euro-Atlantic bodies yet “in substance fashioned to promote Russian leadership” (Cooley, 2012, p. 56; also p. 52 on the substance contrast). The founding side-payments – arms at Russian domestic prices and Moscow footing organizational costs – embedded an enduring dependency that made alignment cheaper than defection for smaller members (Cooley, 2012).

In February 2009, leaders announced the Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF) to handle aggression, counter-terrorism, special operations, serious crime and

drug trafficking, as well as disaster response, with core Russian airborne units as pillars (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024). Medvedev publicly cast the CRRF as ‘just as good as comparable NATO forces’, projecting capacity-equivalence while presenting it as a collective CSTO instrument developed within the Organization (Cooley, 2012, p. 57). In parallel, the CSTO adopted its own Peacekeeping Activity Agreement (signed 6 Oct 2007, in force 15 Jan 2009), which ties deployments either to UN Security Council mandates or to member requests under CSTO procedures (Agreement on the Peacekeeping Activity of the CSTO, 2007/2009).

Perhaps the clearest example of rule-making as power-embedding is the December 20, 2011 decision that no third-country military base can be established on any member’s territory without mutual consent (Cooley, 2012). Russian and allied leaders presented the measure as consolidating bloc discipline and tightening coordination: by requiring ‘mutual consent’ for any foreign basing, the summit outcome effectively endowed Moscow with a veto over future host-nation deals and reinforced its bid to centralize regional security management (Cooley, 2012). Diplomatically, the rule raises the transaction costs of Western basing, shifting bilateral bargaining back into a multilateral forum where Moscow holds agenda power.

From inception Russian planners floated CSTO–NATO cooperation on Afghanistan, threat assessments, information-sharing and consultations. Yet NATO and the U.S. refused organizational engagement, preferring bilateral tracks and the existing NATO–Russia Council, because recognizing CSTO risked endorsing Russia’s hegemonic project (Cooley, 2012). The diplomatic non-recognition foreclosed a bridge-building path and pushed CSTO inward, reinforcing its role as a bloc of regime security and signaling platform in Russia’s rivalry narrative (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024; Davidzon, 2022).

CSTO’s most regularized operations have concentrated on drug interdiction (e.g., multi-year Kanal operations with OSCE, Interpol and non-member observers) and peacekeeping framework-building, rather than expeditionary deployments – an incrementalism consistent with the risk-aversion of incumbent elites (Davidzon, 2022). This functional focus – drugs, organized crime, emergencies – supplies club goods of regime security while avoiding arenas where intra-member dilemmas would surface.

Put together, these moves – public-goods provision, side-payments, rules that socialize deference, and recognition diplomacy – fit hegemonic-stability expectations and, crucially, they are negotiated rather than imposed, because weaker members retain veto points (e.g., consent-of-all on foreign bases) even as those vetoes are embedded in a forum where Moscow shapes the agenda (Davidzon, 2022).

1.1.4 Asymmetric Interdependence and Negotiated Hierarchy: From Practice to Procedure

If classical realism explains the motives and hegemonic stability the instruments, the texture of everyday CSTO diplomacy is best seen through asymmetric interdependence. The asymmetry – greater dependence of smaller members on Russia than vice-versa – is a Soviet legacy manifested in logistics, markets, and security sectors. It structures bargaining by giving Moscow structural issue-linkage options that are legible and credible to counterparts.

The region’s physical networks – pipelines, electricity, rail, integrated defense systems – channel through Russia, while human capital ties (training, language, diaspora) remain thick. Millions of Central Asian workers migrate to Russia and remittances underpin macro-stability at home, creating an everyday lever that is administratively adjustable (Cooley, 2012). Security sectors share doctrines and equipment, which CSTO procurement rules lock-in through discounted access to Russian arms (Cooley, 2012). Russian broadcast media and language policies shape elite discourse, providing soft-power bandwidth for agenda framing (Cooley, 2012).

In diplomatic practice, Moscow’s envoys and presidential emissaries can link an air-base lease, debt restructuring, fuel pricing, labor-quota flexibility, training slots, or arms credits into single bargaining packages – offering quick benefits that are politically salient to incumbents. This is visible in the construction of the CRRF (a reassurance device), the UN-anchored peacekeeping framework (a legitimacy device), and the consent-of-all rule (a veto device), which together transform raw leverage into procedural commitments that elites can defend domestically as multilateral discipline (Davidzon, 2022; Cooley, 2012; Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024).

In issue-areas where preferences converge (counter-terrorism, narcotics, disaster response), cooperation resembles a coordination game: the main challenge is aligning actions, not redistributing gains. CSTO has been most active and least controversial here, e.g., Kanal operations and CRRF-linked drills (Bordyuzha, 2011). By contrast, intra-member disputes (e.g., Kyrgyzstan 2010, or border frictions elsewhere) entail distributional dilemmas and sovereignty sensitivities; here CSTO eschews intervention, citing charter principles of non-interference and member request / Council authorization requirements (Bordyuzha, 2011; CSTO Charter, 2002, art. 5; Agreement on CSTO Peacekeeping Activity, 2007/2009). This selective engagement is not mere “under-performance”; it is a design choice that preserves cohesion and protects Moscow’s recognition politics by avoiding referee roles that would alienate one client side.

Because status is relational, CSTO diplomacy also targets external recognition. Moscow repeatedly signaled willingness for bloc-to-bloc talks with NATO; NATO’s refusal to engage the CSTO as an organization – preferring bilateral channels – denied that recognition and reinforced an insular identity (Cooley, 2012). In response, CSTO statements amplified bloc solidarity (missile defense critiques, basing consent rule), a repertoire that communicates resolve to Western audiences while binding member elites to public positions (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024; Cooley, 2012).

Over time, these diplomatic practices harden into procedures: who sets agendas, what requires unanimity, which deployments need Council authorization, which pay-offs recur (arms pricing, cost-coverage). Procedures are performances of hierarchy – they normalize Russia’s leading role while preserving face-saving equality (rotating presidencies, formal consensus) (Cooley, 2012). In this sense, the CSTO’s formal rules codify a negotiated hierarchy that is sustained by daily diplomacy – elite access, inducements, and status sign-posting – far more than by abstract alliance obligations.

1.2 From the 1992 Tashkent Treaty to the 2002 CSTO Charter: Formal Rules that Codify Hierarchy

1.2.1 Crisis Management by Negotiation: Custody, Command, and the Precedent of Centrality (1991–1993)

The collapse of the USSR generated not only a geopolitical vacuum but also a dense governance problem: who would control, secure, and responsibly dismantle what had been a tightly integrated, multi-republic military machine? The newly independent republics confronted a two-level task. Internationally, they had to negotiate an orderly disentanglement of shared Soviet assets and command-and-control (C2) arrangements. Domestically, leaders needed to reassure military establishments and publics that sovereignty would not translate into strategic exposure or nuclear risk. These are classic two-level games: governing elites negotiated externally while facing internal ratification constraints and audience costs; credible visible arrangements would help them justify choices at home.

The nuclear inheritance magnified urgency. Contemporary tallies indicate that well over 3,000 strategic warheads were located outside the Russian Federation – in Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan – at the moment of dissolution, such that joint custodial and command rules were not optional but imperative (Davidzon, 2022). In this context, the Agreement on the Establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) inserted a legal stopgap: Article 6 committed members to preserve a “common military-strategic space... under a joint command,” including single control over nuclear weapons, pending special agreements (Commonwealth of Independent States [CIS], 1991, art. 6). The Alma-Ata Declaration reiterated the same principle while explicitly acknowledging that some members might aim at neutral or nuclear-free status, an early attempt to reconcile collective stability with diverse national preferences (Alma-Ata Declaration, 1991; Davidzon, 2022).

Institutionally, the CIS created interim command mechanisms that, while provisional, set important precedents. The Council of Defense Ministers (CDM) was established in February 1992, and the High Command of the Joint Armed Forces (JAF) in July 1992, subordinated to the CDM (Davidzon, 2022). Both organs were Moscow-

based and led initially by Russian General Evgeniy Shaposhnikov. This spatial and personnel centrality was, in part, path-dependent pragmatism: Russia alone possessed the communications infrastructure, logistics, and professional staff cadres necessary to safely manage the transition. But, analytically, it also socialized the new states into a hub-and-spoke habit of coordination – Russia as the indispensable hub – that subsequent cooperative projects would tend to reproduce (Davidzon, 2022).

As national forces consolidated, the joint High Command rapidly lost salience; in December 1993, it was abolished and replaced by a Headquarters for the Coordination of Military Cooperation. The CDM itself pivoted from ex-Soviet command to multilateral military cooperation among CIS members (Davidzon, 2022). These institutional evolutions are revealing from a negotiation standpoint. In a distributive sense, Russia gained near-term agenda-setting power; it chaired and hosted the organs, setting procedures and controlling flow of information. In an integrative sense, smaller states gained assurance: unified nuclear control and a common C2 language reduced catastrophic risk while they built their own armies.

Why did weaker states accept a centralized Moscow footprint instead of insisting on more egalitarian dispersion? Because their BATNA – uncoordinated unilateralism – was dramatically worse in 1991–1992. With nuclear weapons on their territories and Soviet units in place, any malfunction could have produced domestic and international blowback. Joint custodial oversight was the cheapest available insurance. Meanwhile, leaders faced domestic ratification problems: publics, militaries, and economic actors required quick signals of order and continuity. Locating interim command in Moscow – where the technical capacity existed – minimized transition costs. Crucially, the cost to smaller states was abstract (a precedent of centralization) while the benefit (short-run safety) was concrete and immediate, a classic bargaining calculus that favors expediency.

First, serious regional security cooperation would be organized around – not against – Russian military assets and know-how, other things equal. Second, joint rules would tend to be law-backed (CIS, 1991, art. 6; Davidzon, 2022) but operationalized through Moscow-centered organs. These expectations, cautiously stated, help explain why the next cooperative layer – the Collective Security Treaty (CST) – took the form

it did, combining a formal collective-defence clause with intra-bloc restraint and a leadership triad that sat atop a Moscow-centered practice (Davidzon, 2022).

To summarize this initial phase in negotiation terms: leaders brokered a crisis bargain under asymmetric capabilities. The bargain's price for smaller states was accepting procedural centrality; its payoff was avoiding strategic slippage. The precedent of centrality would matter later: when the CST's textual promises confronted capacity shortfalls, the logic of turning back to Russia – now not only as hub but also as doctrinal guarantor – would resurface.

1.2.2 The Tashkent Bargain (1992–1995): Dual-Logic Treaty, Doctrinal Asymmetry, and Two-Level Incentives

On 15 May 1992 in Tashkent, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan signed the Collective Security Treaty (CST); in 1993, Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Georgia acceded (Davidzon, 2022; Weitz, 2018). The treaty embodied a twofold logic:

1. **Outward collective defence.** Article 4 pledged that an armed attack on any member would be treated as an attack on all, triggering necessary assistance including military, in line with UN Charter Article 51 (Collective Security Treaty, 1992, art. 4).
2. **Inward conflict management.** Members abstain from the use or threat of force in interstate relations and peacefully settle disagreements – an explicit intra-bloc restraint function (Davidzon, 2022).

In 1995, the Collective Security Concept clarified the leadership architecture and, crucially, the nuclear backstop: Russia's strategic nuclear forces would provide deterrence for CST states in accordance with Russian military doctrine; the Collective Security Council (CSC) would sit at the apex, with foreign and defence ministers' councils below (Davidzon, 2022, p. 77). Pradhan & Kakoty (2024) summarize the guiding principles (indivisibility, consensus, regional defence) and the staged plan to

develop coalition forces and air defence – a design whose ambition exceeded available mechanisms at that time (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024).

A negotiation reading helps to parse the bargain's texture. At the international level (Level I), smaller states obtained a public good – a legal security umbrella anchored in the region's only major military power. At the domestic level (Level II), leaders in Yerevan, Dushanbe, Bishkek, and elsewhere could signal to publics and officer corps that security provision was institutionalized and externally backed, raising audience costs for potential challengers. The price, however, was accepting doctrinal asymmetry – Russia monopolized the ultimate deterrent – and a tiered leadership design under which policy coordination would predictably gravitate to Moscow-centered bodies. This is a negotiated hierarchy: formal status equality (consensus decision-making, sovereign equality rhetoric) coexists with functional inequality in the most consequential policy lever.

Was this a distributive or integrative deal? It had elements of both. Distributive, because smaller states conceded a strategic lever (nuclear doctrine) to the hegemon. Integrative, because they gained collective defence commitments and lower transaction costs in accessing Russian assistance, training, and equipment. The balance was tolerable so long as capabilities did not lag text. But here the CST showed the seeds of later breakdown: without standing multinational forces, joint staff, or habitual planning cycles, Article 4 risked remaining cheap talk – especially for non-state contingencies and intra-bloc disputes (Davidzon, 2022).

The CST's scope conditions thus mattered. On issues of convergent preference (e.g., counter-narcotics, terrorism), coordinative cooperation was feasible. On distributional conflicts (e.g., Armenia–Azerbaijan), the treaty's inward clause was difficult to implement without alienating one signatory. This is typical of alliances formed in fluid threat environments: texts outpace shared threat maps, and credible commitments require apparatus – staffs, forces, routines – that the CST initially lacked.

From a two-level-game angle, Article 4's collective-defence pledge helped with domestic legitimation: Armenian leaders could present CSTO as securing Russian backing, while in Kazakhstan officials could point to a rules-based multilateral shell (e.g., Charter commitments and the later consent-of-all basing rule) rather than pure bilateral dependence. (Weitz, 2018; Davidzon, 2022; Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024).. Yet

this very ambiguity (multilateral form, unilateral substance) created interpretive wiggle room. Baku could later argue the CST had failed as an intra-bloc manager when bilateral Russian mediation – not CST machinery – produced the 1994 ceasefire; Tashkent could say the CST had failed the collective-defence test against non-state threats when no deployable coalition force materialized by the time of the IMU incursions. Those critiques would catalyze recalculations of BATNA in 1999.

In sum, the Tashkent bargain codified hierarchy by doctrine (nuclear), by organ (CSC/CDM/CFM), and by practice (Moscow as coordination core). It promised more than it could deliver in force terms circa mid-1990s. The next phase shows how that promise ran into capacity gaps and divergent threat maps – triggering defections and hedging – and how the remaining core moved to re-bargain towards an organization.

1.2.3 Renewals, Defections, Hedging – and Crisis Diplomacy to Repair the Bargain (1999–2001)

Under Article 11, the CST was concluded for five years with renewal options. The 1999 extension became the test of whether the treaty's formal promise had become credible practice. The outcome exposed its fault lines: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan renewed; Azerbaijan, Georgia, Uzbekistan did not (Davidzon, 2022, pp. 77–78; Weitz, 2018, p. 3).

Azerbaijan's case illustrates the intra-bloc management failure. The Nagorno-Karabakh war (1992–1994) pitted two signatories against each other. The eventual 1994 ceasefire emerged from Russia's bilateral mediation, not from CST institutions, undermining the treaty's inward function in Baku's eyes. Put in negotiation language, the CST did not change payoff structures inside the dyad; its rules did not generate joint problem-solving or impartial enforcement, so Azerbaijan's BATNA – pursue interests outside the CST framework – looked relatively superior by 1999 (Davidzon, 2022, p. 78).

Uzbekistan dramatized the collective-defence gap. Facing IMU incursions from sanctuaries across the Tajik and Afghan borders in 1999–2000, Tashkent sought tangible assistance; yet the CST had not created a standing multinational force nor

mobilization routines to make Article 4 operational. Uzbekistan's unilateral border mining in 1999 signaled a shift to a self-help BATNA, with growing interest in alternative partners (Davidzon, 2022, pp. 77–78). From a bargaining theory standpoint, the absence of credible capability meant the treaty could not deliver contingent rewards for compliance nor punishments for free-riding; thus, rational members confronted by high-salience threats would explore exit or hedging.

Georgia reflects strategic misalignment. By the late 1990s, Tbilisi pursued Euro-Atlantic integration; the political cost of remaining in a Moscow-led bloc rose. A later UN statement (2009) retrospectively framed the thrust as “rid[ding]... Russian influence,” underscoring that for Georgia the identity of the hegemon – not just institutional performance – drove the BATNA calculus (Davidzon, 2022, p. 78).

These exits were accompanied by hedging through GUAM (founded 1997; expanded 1999), whose charter rhetoric on European integration and a “common security space” sat uneasily with CST commitments (Davidzon, 2022, p. 78). The functional implication: CST's club goods were perceived as unreliable, and the price (accepting Russian primacy) too high where viable outside options existed.

Yet the story is not of dissolution but re-bargaining by the core. Between 2000 and 2001, leaders used crisis diplomacy to raise credibility by pairing rules with forces:

- **Minsk CSC (24 May 2000):** procedure for collective decisions on use of force; a coalition strategy; and a model for the regional collective security system (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024).
- **Bishkek (Oct 2000):** decision to establish Central Asian regional forces with a Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF) nucleus; a central staff body; an Agreement on the Status of Forces; and a 2001–2005 plan (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024).
- **Yerevan (May 2001):** measures on military-technical assistance and operational coordination to strengthen the emergent CRRF framework (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024).

In negotiation terms, these steps represented side-payments and institutional sweeteners to retain the remaining coalition: Russia would bear a disproportionate share of financing and capability provision; in return, members would accept deeper institutionalization and procedural discipline. The CRRF concept especially targeted

the CST's capability deficit – shifting from promises to deployable capacity. This set the stage for transforming the treaty into an organization with permanent organs and international legal personality.

Two-level dynamics were visible. Domestically, incumbents in Central Asia could present the CRRF and emerging staff structures as insurance against cross-border militancy and as symbolic equality (collective, not purely bilateral). Internationally, they could share the political responsibility for cooperation with Russia inside a multilateral shell, making alignment more defensible to multiple audiences. The trade was clearer: more Moscow leadership for more credible security goods.

A final note ties back to asymmetric interdependence. In the early 2000s, U.S./coalition basing at K2 (Uzbekistan) and Manas (Kyrgyzstan) temporarily boosted some Central Asian governments' bargaining leverage: they leveraged the presence to raise base payments and secure side-deals, and hedged between Washington and Moscow (Cooley, 2012; cf. Davidzon, 2022). But the structural dependence on Russian training, language, logistics, and markets remained. Hence, as the CRRF and organizational plans matured, the relative attractiveness of returning to a formal, Russia-anchored framework grew – provided the new framework would codify responsibilities and raise exit costs. That is what the CSTO would aim to do.

1.2.4 The Re-Bargain by Design: From Pledges to an Organization (2002–2004) and the Later Rulebook (2009–2011)

On 14 May 2002 in Moscow, the six remaining states – Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan – agreed to transform the CST into the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The Charter and the Agreement on Legal Status entered into force on 18 September 2003; a multinational HQ for the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces began work on 1 January 2004 (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024, p. 136). The move from a pledge-based treaty to an apparatus-bearing organization addresses the CST's two core failures: capability and credibility.

The CSTO established permanent bodies – a Secretariat, a Joint Staff, a Permanent Council, and a Parliamentary Assembly – under the Collective Security

Council (heads of state) and the ministerial councils (foreign, defence, security secretaries) (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024, p. 136). Importantly, members introduced a preferential regime of military-technical cooperation and agreed that Russia would cover 50% of CSTO activities' financing while each of the other five would pay 10% – an explicit side-payment that lowered alignment costs and deepened dependence on Russian resources (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024, p. 135). In bargaining terms, this institutionalizes selective incentives: Russia buys cohesion; recipients accept procedural centrality.

The UN General Assembly granted observer status on 2 December 2004; in March 2010, the CSTO signed a cooperation agreement with the UN Secretariat for supporting UN-mandated peacekeeping; in 2012, it signed a memorandum with the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (Weitz, 2018). This recognition compensated for NATO's continued non-recognition of the CSTO as an organizational peer, which Western officials viewed as a Russian-led instrument of regional influence (Weitz, 2018). The strategy – gain UN docking points if NATO docking points are not on offer – elevated audience costs for future defectors and branded the CSTO as a law-attached security actor.

The CRRF was framed as a universal tool – repelling aggression, conducting special operations, responding to emergencies, and backing border security – with a backbone in Russian airborne units (e.g., 98th Airborne Division, 31st Air Assault Brigade) and contributions from other members (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024, p. 138). The Agreement on CSTO Peacekeeping Activity entered into force on 16 January 2009, and in March 2010 the UNGA adopted a cooperation resolution – legal anchors that supported a peacekeeping contingent inside CSTO procedures (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024, p. 140). These developments turn prior cheap talk into bounded commitments. They also serve two-level needs: domestically, elites can present capability-building as national benefit; internationally, they can claim UN-congruent legitimacy.

Rule-making that codifies hierarchy: the unanimity constraint on foreign bases (2011). On 20 December 2011, CSTO leaders agreed that no third-country military base could be established on any member's territory without the consent of all CSTO members (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024). This consent-of-all rule raises transaction costs for bilateral deals with outside powers and re-centralizes the bargaining forum into

CSTO structures – where Russia has agenda power. Public statements by President Nazarbayev and President Medvedev framed the rule as bloc consolidation, while Russian officials and media cast it as turning a “decorative” structure into a “fully fledged military-political bloc.” (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024, pp. 179–180). In negotiation terms, this is a veto device that both equalizes formal status (everyone gets a veto) and, paradoxically, entrenches hierarchy by ensuring that the default venue for bargaining about bases is multilateral – where Russia’s structural influence is highest.

Despite periodic Russian/CSTO overtures for CSTO–NATO cooperation on Afghanistan, terrorism, and counternarcotics, NATO consistently declined organizational engagement, preferring bilateralism or the NATO–Russia Council (Weitz, 2018). This non-recognition reinforced an inward turn: the CSTO focused on club goods of regime security – drug interdiction (e.g., Kanak operations), policing, crisis monitoring – rather than expeditionary warfare, matching the risk preferences of incumbent elites (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024).

Beyond the Charter’s legalism, two informal levers have been salient:

- **Preferential arms and training:** Russian equipment at domestic prices and training pipelines sustain interoperability on Russian standards, creating path dependence in doctrines and maintenance (Weitz, 2018).
- **Budget asymmetry:** Russia’s 50% financing share functions as a standing side-payment, anchoring loyalty via selective incentives (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024).

Together with the foreign-basing unanimity rule, these levers raise exit costs, filter outside influence, and channel bargaining back into CSTO organs. This is how formal and informal rules combine to codify hierarchy without openly repudiating sovereign equality.

The 2000s also saw Uzbekistan’s temporary re-entry (2006) and later turbulence, as well as the CSTO’s responses to crises (e.g., Kyrgyzstan 2010) largely in non-kinetic modes – logistics, monitoring, humanitarian support – consistent with a design that avoids referee roles in intra-member distributional disputes while performing in coordination games (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024). The alliance thereby sustains cohesion by choosing where to be strong (consensus-based rule-making; basing discipline; CRRF drills; UN-linked peacekeeping frameworks) and where to be deliberately cautious.

What changed from CST to CSTO? Three things:

1. **Apparatus:** from pledges to permanent bodies and a joint staff (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024).
2. **Legal personality and recognition:** UN observer (2004), UN cooperation (2010), aligning with global scripts (Weitz, 2018).
3. **Rule-bargains** that entrench hierarchy while distributing veto rights (2011 consent-of-all on bases), plus financing/ military-technical cooperation incentives that lock-in interdependence (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024).

This is hierarchy by design not by accident: negotiated, law-backed, and routinized – yet still politically fragile when confronted by divergent member preferences. That fragility – how decisions are made, who sets agendas, how force categories are structured – is the subject of Chapter 1.3, where we will dissect consensus formulas, basing-rights regimes, and force structures to show precisely how decision rules and interoperability provisions translate power into procedure.

1.3 Decision-Making, Basing Rights, and Force Structures: How Procedure

Embeds Power

1.3.1 Decision-Making Architecture: The Negotiated Politics of Consensus and Agenda Control

The CSTO's post-2002 evolution from a declarative treaty to an apparatus-bearing organization was driven by the need to close the credibility gap that plagued its 1990s predecessor. This transformation institutionalized a layered decision-making architecture designed to convert high-level political assent into executable plans. This procedural machinery, while appearing as a standard multilateral format, functions as the primary arena where the alliance's negotiated hierarchy is produced and reproduced. It achieves this by balancing the formal, Westphalian principle of sovereign equality – embodied in the consensus rule – with the informal, material reality of asymmetric capabilities, which grants disproportionate agenda-setting power to Russia.

At the apex of this structure sits the Collective Security Council (CSC), comprised of the heads of member states. As the CSTO's supreme body, it defines the organization's strategic direction (CSTO Charter, 2002, art. 13; Weitz, 2018). Subordinated to it are the key ministerial bodies: the Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM), the Council of Defense Ministers (CDM), and the Committee of Secretaries of Security Councils (CSSC), each responsible for translating the CSC's political guidance into specific foreign policy, military, and national security coordination (CSTO Charter, 2002, arts. 14–16). The permanent working bodies in Moscow – the Secretariat and the Joint Staff – form the bureaucratic engine, responsible for drafting proposals and coordinating implementation (Kembaev, 2016; Davidzon, 2022).

The central rule governing this process is consensus. For all non-procedural matters, decisions require the consent of all members, effectively giving each state a formal veto (CSTO Charter, 2002, art. 12; Kembaev, 2016). From a negotiation theory perspective, this is the most significant side-payment to smaller states, a legal guarantee against being overruled by the hegemon. However, this formal equality is mediated by the politics of agenda control. A veto can only be exercised over a pre-existing proposal. The power to frame problems and author the first draft constitutes a formidable source

of influence. In the CSTO, the draft agenda for council sessions is worked out by the Secretariat and requires support from at least half the members to be tabled, serving as an early gatekeeping mechanism (Kembaev, 2016). This process inherently advantages the actor with the greatest staff capacity to produce detailed, technically sound, and timely proposals – overwhelmingly, Russia. The organization’s working language being Russian further lowers the transaction costs for Moscow-initiated drafts and raises them for others (CSTO Charter, 2002; Kembaev, 2016).

The alliance has negotiated procedural safety valves to prevent paralysis. The Charter allows for decisions to be taken in a "limited format" by interested states, provided no other member formally objects. A non-participating state is then not bound by the consequences of that decision (CSTO Charter, 2002; Kembaev, 2016). This is an integrative bargaining solution that allows "coalitions of the willing" to proceed on urgent matters without fracturing the entire organization over the veto of a less-affected member. It creates flexibility, a crucial public good in a diverse alliance.

This entire architecture is a classic two-level game. Internationally (Level I), the structure allows for coordinated action. Domestically (Level II), leaders of smaller states can use the consensus rule to assure their internal audiences that national sovereignty is protected. They can point to the formal veto as proof that they have not ceded control to Moscow. This makes continued membership more politically defensible at home. For example, a leader can use the multilateral cover of a CSC decision to justify a potentially unpopular policy, while simultaneously using their veto threat in closed-door negotiations to extract concessions or protect core interests.

The result is a negotiated equilibrium. Smaller states secured a powerful legal instrument – the veto – to protect their sovereign red lines. Russia, in return, secured a procedural environment where its superior capacity for planning, drafting, and resourcing allows it to shape the agenda from the outset. Power is embedded not by eliminating the veto, but by structuring the political and administrative process so that the cost of using that veto against a well-prepared, Russian-backed initiative becomes politically and reputationally high.

1.3.2 Force Structures and Command Grammar: The Bargain of Interoperability

The CSTO's credibility rests on its ability to translate political decisions into military action. To cure the 1990s CST's "paper tiger" problem, the re-bargain of 2002 focused on creating a portfolio of pre-designated, legally-grounded collective forces. The design, composition, and operational concepts of these forces reveal another layer of the negotiated hierarchy. Smaller member states gain access to a collective military capacity far beyond what they could field alone; the price for this security good is acceptance of an operational ecosystem – a "readiness grammar" – built around Russian military standards, capabilities, and command culture.

The organization's force palette is multi-tiered. For large-scale conventional defense, three regional groupings exist on paper: an East European group (Russia-Belarus), a Caucasian group (Russia-Armenia), and a Central Asian group (Weitz, 2018). The Collective Rapid Deployment Forces (CRDF), centered on Central Asia, were an early creation designed to counter border incursions (Kembaev, 2016). The flagship unit is the Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF), formalized by a June 14, 2009 Agreement. The CRRF is a versatile force of over 20,000 personnel with a broad mandate covering counter-terrorism, stabilization, and emergency response (Kembaev, 2016; Weitz, 2018). Finally, a dedicated Peacekeeping Force (CPF) of over 3,500 personnel was established under a 2007 Agreement, with its mandate aligned with UN principles to allow for potential deployment in UN-sanctioned operations (Kembaev, 2016).

The hierarchy is embedded in the very composition of these forces. Russia provides the qualitative core of the CRRF, contributing elite units like the 98th Guards Airborne Division and the 31st Guards Air Assault Brigade (Weitz, 2018; Tihomirov, 2016). Crucially, Russia also provides the vast majority of high-end "enablers": strategic airlift for deployment, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) platforms, electronic warfare assets, and the backbone of the secure command-and-control (C2) systems. This material asymmetry defines the alliance's operational possibilities. The CSTO's extensive calendar of annual exercises – "Vzaimodeystviye" (Interaction), "Rubezh" (Frontier), and "Nerushimoe Bratstvo" (Unbreakable

Brotherhood) – are designed around scenarios that assume the availability of these Russian enablers (Weitz, 2018, p. 17).

This creates a powerful "readiness grammar" that functions as a tool of political socialization. For a Kazakh or Belarusian unit to be effective within the CRRF, it must be interoperable with Russian systems. This creates strong incentives for smaller members to:

1. Standardize Equipment: Continue purchasing Russian arms and equipment, a process facilitated by the preferential pricing established in the 2000 Agreement on Military-Technical Cooperation (Kembaev, 2016).
2. Harmonize Doctrine: Adopt Russian-compatible command procedures and tactical concepts, which are rehearsed and validated during joint exercises.
3. Align Training: Send officers and specialists to Russian military academies for training, ensuring a common professional language and approach (Weitz, 2018,).

This process creates a deep path dependency. The costs – financial, technical, and operational – of pivoting to an alternative military ecosystem (e.g., NATO standards) become prohibitively high. This is not an imposed diktat but a rational choice made by smaller states. Their BATNA (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement) of building a fully independent, high-readiness force is financially impossible. Therefore, participating in a Russian-centric collective system is the superior option. The bargain is clear: in exchange for the security good of a credible collective force, members accept a long-term dependency on Russian military standards. Power is embedded through the seemingly neutral, technical requirements of interoperability, making alignment the most logical and efficient path.

1.3.3 The Politics of Place: The Negotiated Regime for Basing and Infrastructure

An alliance's power is projected through its physical footprint. Within the CSTO, the rules governing the placement of military bases and the use of infrastructure have been a site of intense negotiation, culminating in a sophisticated legal regime that masterfully codifies the alliance's hierarchy. This regime combines Russia's extensive

bilateral basing presence with a constraining multilateral rulebook, creating a system that protects the sovereignty of smaller states while simultaneously locking in Russia's strategic primacy and gatekeeping role.

The foundation of this regime is Russia's network of bilateral basing agreements, which provide it with a significant forward military presence. Key assets include the 201st Motorized Rifle Division in Tajikistan and the Kant airbase in Kyrgyzstan, which are crucial for power projection in Central Asia, and a major base in Armenia, which is vital for security in the Caucasus (Weitz, 2018). These bases, often maintained on preferential or no-rent terms, are the material manifestation of Russia's role as the regional security guarantor and form the logistical backbone for many of the CSTO's collective capabilities.

The most critical and revealing element of the regime, however, is the multilateral rule governing the presence of third-party forces. The Protocol of December 20, 2011, stipulates that a member state may host military facilities of non-member states only after holding "urgent consultations" with and securing the "absence of a formal objection" from all other CSTO members (Kembraev, 2016; Douhan, 2016). This rule, which functions as a de facto unanimity requirement, is a product of complex negotiation and serves the interests of both the hegemon and the smaller states.

For smaller states, this rule is a powerful sovereignty shield. It gives every member, no matter its size, a formal veto over the basing decisions of its neighbors. This prevents a scenario where one state could unilaterally host a foreign base that is perceived as threatening by another member, thereby importing external rivalries directly into the alliance. It transforms what could be a divisive bilateral issue into a collective decision, forcing transparency and giving a voice to all stakeholders. It is a negotiated guarantee against being strategically surprised or undermined by a fellow ally.

For Russia, the 2011 Protocol is a geopolitical masterstroke. By requiring the consent of all members, it effectively gives Moscow a veto over any future Western (e.g., U.S. or NATO) military presence in the CSTO's zone of responsibility. This rule legally neutralizes the "basing bazaar" of the 2000s, where some Central Asian states skillfully played Moscow and Washington against each other. The BATNA for a CSTO member wanting to host a Western base has been dramatically weakened; it must now

navigate a multilateral process where a Russian objection is almost certain. This was a bargain: smaller states gained a reciprocal veto to protect their own security, and in exchange, Russia gained a powerful instrument to exclude its geopolitical rivals, thereby cementing its "privileged sphere of influence."

This legal framework is reinforced by the technical and logistical standardization of infrastructure. The 2004 Agreement on the operational equipment of areas and joint use of military infrastructure establishes procedures for upgrading and certifying airfields, depots, and communications nodes for collective use (Douhan, 2016). This creates a ratchet effect. As host nations receive assistance to bring their facilities up to CSTO (i.e., Russian) standards, their infrastructure becomes progressively more integrated into a Russian-centric logistical network. The more a base is certified for Russian aircraft and C2 systems, the more indispensable it becomes for collective contingency plans, and the higher the political and financial cost of reconfiguring it for an alternative partner. In this way, hierarchy is codified through engineering: the rules don't explicitly command loyalty, but the technical standards make non-alignment inefficient and costly.

1.3.4 Contingency Planning and the Doctrine of Use: Scripting a Negotiated

Response

An alliance's true character is revealed by what it chooses not to do as much as by what it does. The CSTO's evolution in contingency planning, especially after the 2014 Ukraine crisis, demonstrates a carefully negotiated effort to define a clear but limited doctrine of use. This doctrine, supported by a dense web of legal and procedural instruments, is designed to enhance the alliance's crisis response capabilities while meticulously protecting the core sovereignty and regime security interests of its members. It narrows discretion not by eliminating choice, but by scripting a response that makes alignment with the Russian-led core the most rational and least costly option in a crisis.

The central pillar of the CSTO's doctrine is its deliberate focus on externalized threats. The formal trigger for collective defense remains an act of external aggression

against a member state (Collective Security Treaty, 1992, art. 4; Douhan & Moroz, 2016). The organization's seminal test case – its non-intervention in the widespread ethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 – established a powerful precedent. Moscow, and the organization collectively, defined the crisis as a purely internal matter, falling outside the CSTO's mandate, which was framed to counter external attacks (Weitz, 2018). This was a crucial, negotiated outcome. It created a doctrine that provides members with a shield against foreign invasion and cross-border terrorism – a public good all desire – while protecting incumbent regimes from the establishment of a precedent for intervention in their domestic political affairs, a risk all fear.

After 2014, the CSTO worked to translate this doctrine into concrete operational procedures. Planning documents began to map specific "threat families" (e.g., cross-border militant incursions, foreign-backed attempts to seize power) to pre-agreed operational "menus", primarily involving the CRRF (Kembaev, 2016; Tihomirov, 2016; Douhan, 2016,). This proceduralization reduces decision-making time and ambiguity in a crisis. However, it also channels the collective response along pathways that are pre-scripted around the capabilities and logistical footprint of the alliance's dominant member.

This is reinforced by a deep process of legal harmonization. The CSTO actively encourages and monitors the alignment of member states' national legislation – on martial law, military service, and border security – with the organization's treaties (Douhan, 2016). This lowers the legal and bureaucratic barriers to multinational deployment, allowing for a faster and more seamless activation of collective forces. Similarly, the development of a common framework for information security, including joint operations like "PROXY" to counter "destructive information impact," is a direct response to the perceived threat of "Color Revolutions" (Douhan & Moroz, 2016). It represents another negotiated public good tailored to the regime security interests of all members.

The cumulative effect of this ecosystem – a doctrine focused on external threats, contingency plans scripted around Russian capabilities, interoperability driven by Russian standards, and harmonized domestic legislation – is a powerful narrowing of discretion by design. In a crisis, the path of least resistance is the one already mapped by collective procedures. While the consensus rule and the 2011 basing veto remain as

the ultimate legal backstops for national sovereignty, the entire system is engineered to raise the political, logistical, and reputational costs of deviating from the pre-planned, Russian-underwritten path. This is the mature form of the negotiated hierarchy. Power is embedded not by eliminating the sovereign right to refuse, but by structuring the menu of choices so that collective action, when it happens, is coherent, rapid, and aligned with the interests and capabilities of the organization's indispensable core.

1.4 Patronage and Loyalty: The Unwritten Rules of CSTO Diplomacy

1.4.1 Formal Rules as Scaffolding for Informal Bargains

In asymmetric security relations, stability emerges when the weaker party receives credible autonomy (room to maneuver) and the stronger party receives reliable deference (recognition of hierarchy), with the relationship managed primarily by negotiation rather than constant coercion (Womack, 2016). This “calculus of asymmetric interaction” provides the conceptual grammar for why CSTO procedures – often criticized as slow or symbolic – can nevertheless work as diplomatic instruments to stabilize inequality while projecting unity (Womack, 2016).

The CSTO Charter stipulates that “resolutions ... on issues, except for the procedural ones, shall be adopted by consensus,” and authorizes the Council to adopt resolutions in a limited format provided that no member objects to using that procedure, with non-participants not liable for the consequences of such a resolution (CSTO, 2010, art. 12). This grants smaller members a built-in way to perform unity without being bound to every output, thereby lowering the reputational cost of deference and reducing incentives to brandish a veto in public (CSTO, 2010, art. 12; Womack, 2016). In negotiation terms, “not blocking” becomes a signal of loyalty, while the limited-format device preserves autonomy – a textbook instance of Womack’s autonomy/deference equilibrium (Womack, 2016).

Crucially, Article 7 of the CSTO Charter states that member states shall adopt a resolution on the placement in their territories of military infrastructure of non-CSTO states “after carrying out of urgent consultations (coordination) with other Member States.” (CSTO, 2010, art. 7). The word “urgent” appears in the official English text hosted by the CSTO Secretariat and, therefore, constitutes an authoritative translation for purposes of institutional interpretation (CSTO, 2010, art. 7). This clause turns third-party basing into a collective diplomatic issue, transforming a domestic policy choice into a club-governed matter that can be used to measure and reward loyalty (CSTO, 2010, art. 7; Womack, 2016).

On 20 December 2011 in Moscow, CSTO heads of state agreed that new foreign military bases on a member’s territory would require consent from all members, operationalizing Article 7’s consultation norm into a mutual-consent expectation

(CSTO, 2011, December 20). Independent reporting the following day by RFE/RL and Jamestown confirmed the decision's content and political status (RFE/RL, 2011; Sodiqov, 2012). The rule functions as a gatekeeping device: compliance is observable (no unilateral new basing deals with extraregional militaries), and deviations invite reputational penalties administered through the organization's instruments (RFE/RL, 2011; Sodiqov, 2012; Weitz, 2018).

Because consensus allows the patron to avoid public veto confrontations while limited-format decisions let dissenters avoid legal exposure, side-payments – training slots, equipment pricing, exercise prestige, force-format invitations – can be allocated to reward deference without forcing formal compliance in every case (Womack, 2016; Cooley, 2012). This is classic diplomatic issue-linkage: access politics and symbolic alignment are priced against material and status benefits inside a multilateral frame that recycles bilateral bargains (Cooley, 2012).

As Davidzon (2022) emphasizes, the CSTO occupies the security institutional niche across much of the post-Soviet space, distinct from the EAEU/CIS and intersecting with the SCO, which means status-performing under CSTO colours is a comparatively low-cost way for smaller regimes to bank patronage without visibly capitulating to unilateral Russian diktat (Davidzon, 2022; de Haas, 2016; Weitz, 2018; Davidzon & Libman, 2023). In negotiation language, CSTO meetings, communiqués, and exercise photo-ops provide audiences and rituals through which autonomy and deference are signalled, logged, and remembered (Womack, 2016; CSTO, 2012).

The take-away is that CSTO formalities are not empty; they are the scaffolding for a patronage-for-loyalty regime that keeps asymmetric relationships negotiated and therefore resilient – which helps explain why collective-defence performance may be secondary to hierarchy management in the alliance's everyday diplomacy (Womack, 2016; Davidzon, 2022; Davidzon & Libman, 2023).

1.4.2 The Instruments of Patronage: Access, Arms, Training, and Force Formats

In Kyrgyzstan, Russia's Kant air base – established in 2003 – received a 15-year extension in 2012 (with a five-year renewal option), as reported by Kyrgyz officials and RFE/RL (RFE/RL, 2012; Eurasianet, 2009). The extension was negotiated alongside a nearly \$500 million Russian debt write-off, confirmed by Reuters at the time and repeatedly referenced thereafter (Reuters, 2012, 2014). The Soviet-era 49-year “concept” floated during 2009 talks never matured into a final lease but illustrated how basing was priced and re-priced across leadership changes and bargaining windows (RFE/RL, 2009; Marat, 2011). In Tajikistan, the former 201st division – re-designated Russian 201st Military Base – had its presence extended to 2042 through an agreement signed in 2012 and ratified in 2013, an arrangement publicly described as Russia's largest land base abroad (RFE/RL, 2012; RFE/RL, 2013; Rotar, 2013). These transactions align with Cooley's systematic account of local rulers monetizing basing – trading regulatory consent and alliance signalling for rents, write-offs, and infrastructure support (Cooley, 2013).

Because Article 7 mandates consultations/coordination on non-CSTO military infrastructure, and because the 2011 leaders' decision created a mutual-consent norm for new foreign bases, access becomes a club-regulated good within which deference to alliance gatekeeping is observable (CSTO, 2010; CSTO, 2011; RFE/RL, 2011). This is precisely the kind of audience-cost structure Womack expects in asymmetry: weaker members can perform loyalty on principle (no surprises on foreign basing) yet still bargain bilaterally over lease length, rent, and offsets (Womack, 2016; Cooley, 2012).

Patronage also flows through supply chains and schooling (officer education; security-service curricula), which Cooley documents as levers to privilege member states who align on contentious dossiers such as access restrictions or crisis framings (Cooley, 2012). These side-payments do not merely “buy” compliance; they create sunk reputational costs of defection by entangling domestic security actors in Russian-authored standards and CSTO-branded practices (Cooley, 2012; Womack, 2016).

The Collective Rapid Reaction Forces (CRRF) were formed by CSTO Council decision on 4 February 2009 as a constant-readiness instrument composed of national units and specialized elements (CSTO Joint Staff, 2009). Official CSTO pages describe

the CRRF as about 18,000 to more than 20,000 personnel; this study therefore treats the headline strength as a range shaped by year and composition. (CSTO, 2021). The Peacekeeping Forces, legally distinct from the CRRF and structured to operate under CSTO or UN mandates, are officially described as “about 3,600 people,” again using the CSTO’s own phrasing (CSTO Joint Staff, n.d.; CSTO, 2021; CSTO, 2019/2020). The vocabulary “about” appears directly on CSTO pages and press notes, confirming that elasticity is by design, not a secondary extrapolation (CSTO Joint Staff, n.d.; CSTO, 2021).

Serial exercises – Interaction, Rubezh, Echelon, and the peacekeeping Indestructible Brotherhood series – serve military purposes while doubling as diplomatic theatre aimed at domestic and international audiences, messaging solidarity and interoperability without committing to automatic intervention (STO, 2020; CSTO, 2021a; CSTO, 2021b; CSTO, 2021c). In Womack’s terms, this is “performative deference”: attendance, scenario acceptance, and public choreography that earn patronage – training slots, visibility, and procurement access – at comparatively low cost to smaller members (Womack, 2016; CSTO, 2020–2022).

Because the currency is access and status more than mutual risk-sharing, the toolkit inherently prioritizes regime stability and hierarchy maintenance over collective-defense obligations in the narrow sense, a pattern noted in both the academic literature and organizational self-presentation (Davidzon, 2022; CSTO, 2022).

The instrument bundle – basing governance, force formats, exercises, supply/training rents – constitutes a patronage system that allows Moscow to scale rewards and discipline, while giving smaller members room to signal compliance without total policy surrender (Womack, 2016; Cooley, 2012).

1.4.3 Loyalty as Currency: Gatekeeping, Crisis Framing, and Selective

The 2011 decision to require mutual consent for new foreign bases made access alignment the most transparent and verifiable loyalty signal inside the alliance (CSTO, 2011; RFE/RL, 2011). Because Article 7 had already framed third-party basing as a collective concern, the 2011 step codified a veto expectation at the political level

without reopening the Charter text (CSTO, 2010; CSTO, 2011). In practice, governments visibly bank patronage by not cutting surprise basing deals with extraregional actors, and by pre-consulting to pass the “no-surprise” test (Cooley, 2012).

On 6 January 2022, after President Tokayev’s appeal, the CSTO Collective Security Council decided to send CSTO Collective Peacekeeping Forces to Kazakhstan “for a limited period ... to protect strategically important facilities,” referencing treaty law and the CSTO Peacekeeping Agreement (CSTO, 2022a). On 10 January 2022 an extraordinary session chaired by Armenia confirmed the deployment and underlined its temporary character, while praising the rapid consensus that enabled same-day troop movements (CSTO, 2022b). The organization’s historical portal records that the decision referenced Article 4 of the Collective Security Treaty – the clause on collective defense in case of aggression – reflecting how crisis narrations are framed to fit the treaty’s categories (CSTO, 2022c). Contemporary expert commentary has widely described the mission as symbolic – guarding nodes, signaling resolve, and conferring legitimacy – rather than an open-ended stabilization operation (Libman & Davidzon, 2023). In negotiation terms, Kazakhstan publicly performed deference by inviting the alliance and adopting its legal language; the patron, acting through the CSTO, delivered patronage (cover, logistics, international branding) at modest operational cost (Womack, 2016; CSTO, 2022; Akorda, 2022).

During the June 2010 Osh/Jalal-Abad violence, Russian President Medvedev and CSTO leadership publicly framed the crisis as a domestic affair and emphasized that CSTO forces were designed for external aggression rather than internal ethnic conflict, declining to deploy (Marat, 2010; Górecki, 2010). Contemporary reporting and analysis corroborate the non-intervention, noting the political risks of ethnic entanglement and unclear rules of engagement (Jamestown, 8 Jun 2010; Jamestown, 28 Jun 2010). Human-rights and official reporting document the extraordinary human costs of the violence – hundreds killed and thousands of homes destroyed – underscoring the stakes of the decision (Human Rights Watch, 2010; U.S. Department of State, 2011). OSW’s contemporaneous commentary details Moscow’s policy logic and communications, further confirming restraint (Górecki, 2010). Cooley’s policy memo the same year characterized Russia’s justifications as strategic framing,

highlighting how the boundary between “internal disorder” and “external aggression” became the negotiation space around which patronage was priced (Cooley, 2011).

Taken together, Kazakhstan 2022 and Kyrgyzstan 2010 reveal how the same legal architecture – Charter plus Treaty plus peacekeeping agreement – supports both action and restraint, depending on how the requesting state frames the threat and how the patron assesses the costs and optics (CSTO, 2010; CSTO, 2022). This is consistent with Mearsheimer’s expectation that, absent acute external threat, states tend to buck-pass and minimize costly commitments, which alliances counter by pricing participation through side-payments and reputational currencies (Mearsheimer, 2001; Cooley, 2012). In the CSTO, loyalty is thus measured most cleanly through access gatekeeping and language alignment with Charter/Treaty categories, while patronage is disbursed via visibility, training, equipment, and short-horizon deployments (CSTO, 2011; CSTO, 2021; CSTO, 2022; Womack, 2016).

The currency of loyalty is gatekeeping and framing; the payment is selective, symbolic, and status-heavy patronage; the constraint is audience cost inside and beyond the alliance, which explains when and how the tool is used (Womack, 2016; Libman & Davidzon, 2023).

1.4.4 The Unwritten Rules (and Their Limits)

Unwritten Rule #1: No surprises on third-party access. Because Article 7 embeds collective consultations/coordination for non-CSTO military infrastructure, and the 2011 decision layered a mutual-consent expectation for new foreign bases, advance coordination on base politics is treated as a core loyalty signal (CSTO, 2010; CSTO, 2011; RFE/RL, 2011). This does not preclude bilateral bargaining over lease terms, rents, or offsets – as Kyrgyzstan’s 2012 package and 2014 confirmations made clear – but it does require deference to the club gate (Reuters, 2012; Reuters, 2014). In asymmetry theory’s language, this is deference on principle and autonomy on modalities (Womack, 2016).

Unwritten Rule #2: Frame domestic unrest in alliance-law terms. Requests that explicitly invoke Treaty/Charter categories (“threats to sovereignty,” “external

aggression,” “regional stability”) are more likely to unlock peacekeeping or CRRF-related support, as Kazakhstan 2022 highlights (CSTO, 2022). Crises framed as internal or ethnically charged, by contrast, have tended to elicit restraint, as Kyrgyzstan 2010 shows (Marat, 2010; Górecki, 2010; OSCE, 2010). The unwritten element is that legitimation in CSTO language is part of the negotiation package for patronage, not merely legalistic décor (Womack, 2016).

Unwritten Rule #3: Perform unity, preserve room. By pairing consensus with limited-format decisions, members can demonstrate unity (not blocking) while retaining policy room (not implementing), which keeps the relationship in a negotiated equilibrium rather than sliding into coercion (CSTO, 2010; Womack, 2016). The price of this flexibility is that collective-defence outputs remain selective and symbolic unless the patron’s interests and costs clearly align, which multiple observers and official retrospectives (Davidzon, 2022; CSTO, 2022).

As Womack notes, asymmetry is resilient when managed by negotiation, but it also has corollaries: forcing deference without adequate patronage provokes defensive hedging, and under-providing patronage erodes deference into formalism (Womack, 2016). (Womack, 2016). Post-2011 access gatekeeping, for example, increased the opportunity cost of hedging with third parties; yet if benefit streams (training, kit, crisis support) appear thin, elites may explore parallel venues (SCO, bilateral deals) while still performing CSTO rituals (Davidzon, 2022). The Kazakhstan 2022 mission illustrates the sweet spot – symbolic, time-bounded, and status-rich – while Kyrgyzstan 2010 shows how category framing can be used to withhold patronage without formally breaching solidarity (CSTO, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Górecki, 2010; Akiner, 2016).

All three unwritten rules flow directly from the legal and procedural architecture analyzed in § 1.3 – Article 7’s gatekeeping, Article 12’s consensus/limited-format equilibrium, and the CRRF/Peacekeeping force formats – and they explain how the CSTO delivers control and regime maintenance more reliably than collective defense in the symmetric sense (CSTO, 2010; Davidzon, 2022).

1.5 Conclusion

Chapter 1 has argued that the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) operates as a negotiated hierarchy rather than a symmetric collective-defence pact. Formal rules and routines convert material asymmetries into stable patterns of autonomy for weaker members and deference to the stronger patron, with Russia positioned as the organizer and allocator of security goods (Womack, 2016; Weitz, 2018). Judged through that lens, what can appear as “under-performance” against NATO-style yardsticks is better read as an equilibrium that prioritizes control, regime stability, and gatekeeping over automatic mutual aid (Cooley, 2012; Deyermond, 2018; Womack, 2016).

Section 1.3 showed that consensus and the possibility of limited-format decisions allow members to signal unity without uniform commitment, lowering the reputational cost of deference while preserving policy space for autonomy (CSTO, 2010, art. 12). These devices embed hierarchy procedurally: power is not exercised by eliminating vetoes but by structuring agendas and outputs so that the patron’s preferences acquire bureaucratic momentum and dissent incurs audience costs (Womack, 2016; Davidzon, 2022). In negotiation terms, “not blocking” becomes a visible loyalty signal, while “not implementing” via limited formats protects domestic room to manoeuvre—precisely the autonomy/deference balance in asymmetric relations (CSTO, 2010, art. 12; Womack, 2016).

Section 1.4 showed that basing and third-party access are transformed from bilateral bargains into club-regulated issues, turning consultation/consent practices into a loyalty test that is salient to the patron and easy to observe (Davidzon, 2022). This enables issue-linkage: by tying access alignment to benefits (training, equipment, exercise prominence, agenda access), Moscow can price deference while smaller members retain face-saving sovereignty by negotiating modalities and timing (Cooley, 2012; Womack, 2016). Because deviations are visible and costly, access politics function as the most reliable signal of allied alignment (Cooley, 2012; Davidzon, 2022).

Preferential supply chains, education pipelines for officers and security services, and exercise choreography under CSTO colours bind members via interoperability on Russian standards and status performance, not via an automatic war-

fighting commitment (Cooley, 2012; Davidzon, 2022). These instruments create sunk reputational and organizational costs to defection and produce path dependence in capability development (Cooley, 2012; Womack, 2016). Annual exercise cycles double as diplomatic theatre that records who attends, who leads, and who accepts scenarios—reputational ledgers that can be drawn upon in future bargaining (Cooley, 2012; Davidzon, 2022).

The organization's crisis behaviour is selective: action is more likely when threats can be framed as external and when costs/optics align; restraint is more likely when crises are internal or distributional among members (Davidzon, 2022). That pattern reflects a patronage-for-loyalty regime: clients perform deference (e.g., access alignment; legal framing that maps onto treaty language), and the patron delivers bounded patronage (limited deployments, protection of key nodes, diplomatic cover) when the expected payoff is positive (Womack, 2016). From a structural-realist angle, this is consistent with incentives to buck-pass costly commitments absent acute external threat; the CSTO counters not with automaticity but with priced inducements that align preferences at the margin (Mearsheimer, 2001; Cooley, 2012).

Three claims follow. (1) CSTO constitutional devices are diplomatic technologies for managing inequality, calibrating how loyalty is shown and how autonomy is preserved (Womack, 2016; Davidzon, 2022). (2) Access politics are the alliance's most reliable loyalty currency because they are highly salient and observable, and they underwrite privileged access to other benefits (Cooley, 2012; Davidzon, 2022). (3) Force formats and exercises are designed less to promise automatic risk-sharing and more to deliver credible, status-rich, logistically Russian-enabled responses that protect regimes and signal cohesion (Cooley, 2012; Davidzon, 2022).

The CSTO is most coherent when problems are coordination games (counter-terrorism, counternarcotics, emergencies) and most cautious when problems are distributional conflicts among members (border clashes, contested war outcomes), where decisive "refereeing" would alienate one client and jeopardize the very hierarchy the institution sustains (Davidzon, 2022; Cooley, 2012). Evaluations should therefore judge the organization by hierarchy maintenance at acceptable cost, not by ideal-typical collective-defence metrics (Womack, 2016; Davidzon, 2022).

For member governments, the lowest-cost path to security goods is to perform deference on access politics and to translate domestic crises into CSTO legal language to unlock bounded assistance (Davidzon, 2022). For external actors, gatekeeping is a club function; attempts to bypass the forum will be read as defections from the loyalty bargain (Cooley, 2012). For analysts, the research agenda should track how the price of loyalty and the supply of patronage shift with wider geopolitical change, testing the resilience of this negotiated hierarchy over time (Womack, 2016; Davidzon, 2022).

CHAPTER 2:
THE FAULT LINES OF SOLIDARITY:
DIPLOMATIC TENSIONS AND CRISIS (NON-)RESPONSE

2.1. Introduction: Testing the Limits of Collective Security

This chapter examines how a nominal collective-security alliance behaves when member-state crises demand costly action, using the CSTO's formal commitments as the baseline against which observed practice is judged (Collective Security Treaty, 1992, art. 4). The CSTO's Charter declares goals of strengthening peace and protecting members' sovereignty while "preferring political means," creating an institutional promise of solidarity that is deliberately elastic in application (CSTO Charter, 2002, preamble & art. 4).

To test that promise, the chapter assembles three stress tests that differ in legal triggers, escalation dynamics, and audiences: the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, the Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan border violence peaking in 2022, and regime-threatening unrest in Belarus (2020–) and Kazakhstan (January 2022) (OSCE, 1995; President of Russia, 2020; OSCE, 2022a; United Nations, 2022; CSTO, 2022a). The selection is designed to capture the full spectrum from inter-state conflict on internationally recognized borders, through unresolved administrative frontiers inside the post-Soviet space, to intra-state regime crises where the incumbent frames the threat in security rather than political terms (President of Russia, 2020; OSCE, 1995; OSCE, 2022a).

In the 2020 Karabakh war, hostilities ended with a trilateral statement that embedded a Russian peacekeeping presence without any CSTO operation, placing crisis management outside the alliance framework and inside a bespoke arrangement among the three principals (President of Russia, 2020, November 10). That outcome interacted with the OSCE's long-standing Minsk Group mandate – framework, not enforcement – whose remit highlights the chronic gap between facilitation and hard security when a cease-fire must be guaranteed (OSCE, 1995). After renewed border incidents and humanitarian shocks, the EU deployed a civilian monitoring mission on Armenia's side of the frontier in January 2023, signaling the entry of a new third-party security actor at the margins of the CSTO area (Council of the European Union, 2023)

By contrast, the September 2022 Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan escalation produced urgent appeals from multilateral bodies for de-escalation and restraint, but no CSTO peacekeeping deployment analogous to Kazakhstan, leaving the immediate crisis to bilateral military-diplomatic channels and OSCE forum diplomacy (OSCE, 2022a; United Nations, 2022). The parties traded accusations at the OSCE Permanent Council in the weeks that followed, underscoring both the conflict’s volatility and the absence of a neutral, enforceable security umbrella within the Eurasian bloc (OSCE Permanent Council, 2022a, 2022b)

Where regime survival, not interstate delimitation, was at stake, alliance behavior diverged further: Belarus’s post-election crackdown and subsequent internationalization through the diversion of Ryanair FR4978 drew sustained censure and sanctions debates in Euro-Atlantic institutions, while Minsk’s security relied primarily on bilateral Russian backing rather than on a CSTO mission (OSCE/ODIHR, 2020; ICAO, 2022, 2023). In stark contrast, in January 2022 the CSTO, citing Article 4, deployed a limited, time-bound peacekeeping contingent to Kazakhstan at the president’s request, and withdrew within days after key nodes were secured – its first operational use and a clear demonstration of rapid alliance activation when an incumbent framed unrest as an externalized security threat (CSTO, 2022b; CSTO, 2022a)

These contrasts motivate the chapter’s core inquiry: whether the CSTO’s legal architecture and diplomatic repertoire generate consistent collective-security effects across crisis types, or whether outcomes hinge on a hierarchy of priorities in which regime security takes precedence over neutral mediation or defense of weaker members (CSTO Charter, 2002; Collective Security Treaty, 1992, art. 4) The empirical tests are designed to avoid inference beyond the record: Karabakh relies on the official trilateral statement and OSCE mandate texts, Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan on UN/OSCE statements and filed delegational interventions, Belarus on OSCE/ODIHR and ICAO documents, and Kazakhstan on CSTO communiqués (President of Russia, 2020; OSCE, 1995; OSCE Permanent Council, 2022; ICAO, 2022; CSTO, 2022a)

Finally, the chapter specifies its comparative benchmark: “collective security” is operationalized as timely, rules-based protection of a member’s security and sovereignty – whether through deterrent diplomacy, peacekeeping, or enforceable

guarantees – whereas “selective intervention” denotes contingent activation aligned with patron-client priorities or regime-security narratives (UNGA, 2011; CSTO, 2022c). On that basis, Sections 2.2–2.4 assess how the same treaty language yielded starkly different diplomatic choices across the South Caucasus, the Ferghana rim, and two domestic regime crises – thereby “testing the limits” of collective security in practice with only official, verifiable records as evidence (Collective Security Treaty, 1992, art. 4; Council of the European Union, 2023).

2.2 Alliance Credibility as a Variable Shaping Bargaining Power

2.2.1. Re-defining Alliance Credibility in an Asymmetric Pact

In the context of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), “alliance credibility” cannot be reduced to a mechanical promise of troop deployments. For small members, credibility functions as a shadow of enforcement that alters an adversary’s expected costs before shots are fired and beyond what is written in communiqués. In asymmetric alignments, this shadow depends on (i) the patron’s bandwidth and political priorities at a given historical moment, (ii) the legal-normative environment in which the conflict is embedded, and (iii) the institutional venues that translate signals into enforceable constraints. Where the shadow is thin, bargaining reverts to raw material power, time pressure, and the vagaries of domestic ratification.

The Nagorno-Karabakh case after 2020 spotlights all three drivers. First, the legal-normative baseline overwhelmingly privileged territorial integrity over external self-determination: throughout the 1990s, UN Security Council resolutions reaffirmed Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity and demanded withdrawal from occupied territories (UNSC, 1993). This corpus, together with OSCE practice, established the overarching grammar of acceptable settlements (Krüger, 2010). In such a legal setting, any alliance signal supporting Armenia’s maximalist aims risked contradicting international expectations. Armenia could advocate internal self-determination and autonomy concepts, but remedial secession found no robust legal foothold in the mainstream doctrine surveyed by Krüger (2010).

Second, the venue machinery through which credibility is operationalised shifted over time. For decades the OSCE Minsk Group offered elaborate process with limited coercive tools, repeatedly broaching package and step-by-step proposals (Prague Process, Madrid Principles) without closing preference gaps or building ratification pools on either side (Yavuz & Gunter, 2023; de Waal, 2021). The result was a “frozen” diplomacy habituated to cost-free participation: a repertoire that generated audience fatigue while failing to embed reliable tripwires. Russia’s dual role – Minsk co-chair and regional hegemon – compounded ambiguity, generating expectations in Yerevan that Moscow would ultimately prevent strategic defeat yet rarely creating ex-

ante deterrent commitments with clear enforcement ladders (Yavuz & Gunter, 2023; Broers, 2021).

Third, the patron's opportunity costs – dramatically altered by the war in Ukraine – further thinned the enforcement shadow. As Moscow's bandwidth contracted, so did the plausibility that alliance rhetoric would translate into coercive protection on Armenia's internationally recognised territory after 2020 (ICG, 2025; Chatham House, 2025; Reuters, 2024). The cumulative effect was a credibility shock: the small ally's bargaining set shrank, while the victorious rival's Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement (BATNA) improved. Negotiation then gravitated toward issues the weaker party could implement without external muscle – borders, non-use of force, renunciation of claims, and text-anchored restraint – and away from status formulas or third-party security geometries that required a robust patron.

This chapter uses the credibility lens to explain how bargaining power was redistributed after the 2020 war and, especially, following the 2023 Azerbaijani operation that dissolved the de facto Karabakh authorities and precipitated a mass exodus of ethnic Armenians. The International Crisis Group's 2025 briefing documents these developments and the subsequent text-first peace architecture in detail, including a draft Agreement on Establishment of Peace and Inter-State Relations (core provisions agreed in 2024), late-stage clauses on “non-deployment of third-party forces” along the mutual border, withdrawal of international legal claims, and the formal delinking of the transport file from the treaty text – alongside a parallel, witnessed framework for a transit route via Armenia (ICG, 2025). The same briefing records the White House initialling on 8 August 2025 and the joint Armenian-Azerbaijani letter requesting closure of the OSCE Minsk Group mandate – symbolic acts consolidating venue shift from multilateral process to pragmatic bilateralism with selective great-power witnessing (ICG, 2025).

Reframing credibility this way also clarifies diplomacy vs. negotiation. Diplomacy manages signalling, venue, and audience costs (closing Minsk; White House optics); negotiation engineers issue-linkage, sequencing, and verification (non-deployment clause; phased border work; delinking “route”). In the post-2020 landscape, diplomacy lowered the temperature enough to render negotiation feasible;

negotiation then produced operational guarantees that justify diplomatic ceremony (ICG, 2025; Yavuz & Gunter, 2023).

Within an alliance designed for control rather than collective defence (Chapter 1's claim), credibility becomes contingent on the hegemon's strategic calculus. When that calculus turns inward, small allies must construct textual substitutes for deterrence; rivals will translate military successes into treaty minimalism backed by legal-normative baselines that already favour territorial integrity (Krüger, 2010; ICG, 2025).

2.2.2. Armenia's Post-2020 Repertoire: From Patronage Expectations to Text-Centric Hedging

The 44-day war of 2020 ended a quarter-century of "frozen" expectations. Azerbaijan's battlefield success – crowned by the capture of Shusha/Shushi – dislocated Armenia's security orthodoxy, which had rested on Minsk formats plus a presumed patron backstop (Yavuz & Gunter, 2023). The 2023 Azerbaijani operation then removed the last de facto Armenian institutions from Karabakh and triggered the exodus of over 100,000 ethnic Armenians – an "open wound" that Yerevan deliberately kept off the core peace agenda to avoid scuttling inter-state normalisation (ICG, 2025). For a small state suddenly deprived of credible enforcement, the pivot was not a clean "alignment shift," but a transactional hedging strategy centred on monitors, diversification, and treaty minimalism.

Since late 2022, an EU mission has observed the Armenian side of the border. Its presence created political tripwires (international observers in harm's way) and generated independent reporting streams beyond Moscow. The 2025 draft accord, however, stipulates non-deployment of third-party forces along the mutual border – a design choice that preserves sovereignty symmetry while pushing reassurance into technical assistance and incident-management channels (ICG, 2025). This is a classic instrument substitution: where alliance enforcement is thin, mandates and monitoring geometry are re-imagined to be politically sustainable.

Historically reliant on Russia, Yerevan moved to French and Indian suppliers – decisions that were as much about audience costs and domestic ratification as about

capability (ICG, 2025). The signalling logic is straightforward: limited force structure gains notwithstanding, procurement choices can rebuild public confidence that the state retains agency.

The emergent inter-state text – recognition of territorial integrity, non-use of force, mutual renunciation of claims, cooperation on missing persons – reflects a negative peace logic (absence of war) rather than positive peace (reconciliation). According to ICG, this minimalist core was substantially agreed in 2024; two hard clauses – non-deployment and withdrawal of international legal claims – were finished in March 2025 (ICG, 2025). The choice to exclude a right-of-return clause for Karabakh Armenians from the treaty text – while politically painful – was a deliberate de-risking of ratification (ICG, 2025).

After more than a year of bilateral drafting, the leaders met in Abu Dhabi (July 2025) and then initialled at the White House on 8 August 2025, with a parallel framework for a transit route via Armenia agreed the same day. They also jointly asked the OSCE to close the Minsk mandate – moving the legacy lexicon (“Nagorno-Karabakh”) off the diplomatic table (ICG, 2025). This re-anchoring of venues – away from process-heavy co-chairing toward witnessed bilateralism – mirrors Armenia’s wider shift: from reliance on patronage faith to a text-first craft that can survive without a hegemon’s day-to-day enforcement.

Baku’s insistence that Armenia remove preambular language referencing “reunification” with Nagorno-Karabakh introduced a domestic-politics lever into sequencing. As the ICG briefing notes, Yerevan can sign an agreement now yet faces the uncertainty of a referendum to adopt a new constitution – hence proposals to sign-now/delay-ratification or pursue parliamentary workarounds that neutralise territorial-claim effects in law (ICG, 2025). For Armenia, this is a paradigm case of a small state navigating audience costs while trying to lock in inter-state normalisation.

Armenia’s move toward an integrity-centred text aligns with the mainstream international law surveyed in Krüger (2010), where external self-determination remains exceptional and internal self-determination (autonomy, minority protections) is the legally salient path. That legal frame does not resolve trauma; it channels it into domestic constitutional evolution and bilateral guarantees rather than status claims (Krüger, 2010).

Armenia's bargaining behaviour after 2020 matches the logic of credibility loss: external enforcement shrinks; the instrument set tilts to monitors, texts, and diversification; venues are curated for implementability. In alliance terms, a patron-centred logic gave way to transactional hedging. In diplomatic terms, symbolism (closure of Minsk; White House optics) was re-purposed as a ratification asset, not a substitute for deterrence (ICG, 2025; Yavuz & Gunter, 2023).

2.2.3. Azerbaijan's Textualisation of Victory: Minimalist Peace, Maximal

Leverage

Azerbaijan entered the post-2020 period with decisive battlefield leverage and a markedly improved BATNA: it could maintain pressure, consolidate gains, and dictate the pace of talks (Yavuz & Gunter, 2023; ICG, 2025). The 2023 operation removed the last de facto Armenian authority in Karabakh and precipitated a humanitarian exodus. In this context, Baku's diplomatic design aimed to convert facts on the ground into text – while delinking high-salience files whose symbolism might sabotage the deal (ICG, 2025).

The minimalist core. By 2024, the sides agreed on mutual recognition of territorial integrity, mutual renunciation of claims, non-use of force, and cooperation on missing persons – a package that foregrounds sovereignty and restraint rather than status engineering (ICG, 2025). Two additional provisions – non-deployment of third-party forces along the mutual border and withdrawal of international legal claims – were completed in March 2025. The former aligns with Baku's longstanding discomfort with external monitors near the line; the latter removes a parallel litigation track that might erode the political space for reconciliation (ICG, 2025).

Delinking the "route". The 2020 ceasefire's language on "unimpeded" access to Nakhchivan via Armenia evolved into a separate framework agreed in August 2025 – popularly dubbed the "Trump route." Crucially, the framework's wording appears to preclude corridor-style sovereignty erosion and keeps customs/border/security modalities under discussion, with Washington's witness role reinforcing implementation incentives (ICG, 2025). This is negotiation-craft par excellence: re-

labelling an explosive file to lower audience costs while preserving material connectivity goals.

Minsk closure and symbolic hygiene. Baku pressed to terminate the Minsk Group mandate (1995) whose very terminology – “Nagorno-Karabakh” – signified an obsolete era. The joint letter to the OSCE in August 2025 to close the mandate is recorded by ICG; it removes a legacy forum that might invite external vetoes and revives status debates (ICG, 2025).

Constitutional conditionality. Baku’s insistence that Armenia excise preambular language construed as a territorial claim deploys ratification risk as a bargaining instrument: it externalises uncertainty onto Yerevan’s domestic process, potentially framing a failed referendum as a rejection of peace (ICG, 2025). ICG canvasses realistic compromises – sign now, ratify after change, or interim legislative steps – to avoid deadlock (ICG, 2025).

Rhetoric and audiences. The “Western Azerbaijan” discourse in Baku both reassures domestic constituencies and parries expectations of a right of return for Karabakh Armenians by recasting the memory politics of displacement (ICG, 2025). ICG notes that many analysts interpret this rhetoric less as a concrete plan for conquest than as a symbolic counter to Armenian narratives – again, a diplomacy of audiences rather than maps. Meanwhile, Baku’s long-term connectivity vision (Middle Corridor) ties peace to investment and logistics, reinforcing incentives to formalise normalisation (ICG, 2025).

Negotiation-craft reading. Azerbaijan’s approach maximises leverage while displaying bounded flexibility. By keeping talks bilateral and using witnessed gestures rather than full-blown co-chair mediation, it avoids creating new external veto players. By delinking the route and proposing non-deployment, it narrows security externalities. By pushing constitutional change, it tests the durability of Armenian commitments at the level that matters most: domestic acceptance (ICG, 2025). None of this guarantees success; but it does textualise victory into a form legible to international partners informed by a law of territorial integrity (Krüger, 2010).

Interim synthesis. For the stronger party, alliance credibility failure on the other side widens the option set: maintain pressure without overreach; cash in gains via legal

minimalism; trade symbolic concessions (route wording, Minsk closure) for concrete strategic outcomes (sovereignty recognition, demilitarised borders) (ICG, 2025).

2.2.4. Formats, Sequencing, and Verification: How Bargaining Works When Deterrence Thins

When alliances do not – or cannot – produce enforceable tripwires, format and sequence become the currency of diplomacy. The post-2020 South Caucasus illustrates this with unusual clarity.

Bilateral backbone; selective witnessing. The 2025 ICG briefing emphasises that the parties completed a final text in March 2025 after over a year of purely bilateral negotiations; they met in Abu Dhabi in July; and on 8 August 2025 they initialled at the White House and jointly asked the OSCE to close the Minsk mandate (ICG, 2025). The choreography matters: it affirms ownership, limits external vetoes, and harvests optics as a ratification resource – without re-creating a heavy co-chair process.

Design of the agreement. The Agreement on Establishment of Peace and Inter-State Relations rests on four pillars agreed in 2024 – integrity recognition, non-claims, non-use of force, cooperation on missing persons – and two hard clauses added in March 2025 – non-deployment of third-party forces along the border and withdrawal of international legal claims (ICG, 2025). This architecture narrows security externalities, internalises dispute management, and foregrounds verifiable behaviours. Precisely because alliance enforcement is not guaranteed, verification shifts to what the dyad itself can monitor, with third parties repositioned as investors and facilitators rather than as security guarantors.

The monitoring/mandate pivot. ICG records discussions about re-imagining the EU mission’s role if “non-deployment” is to be honoured: one option is to convert it into integrated border-management assistance, a known EU template in other regions (ICG, 2025). This is an elegant solution to a credibility problem: move from tripwire-style observation (which presumes deterrence) to capacity-building (which presumes cooperation) without importing armed third parties.

Route semantics and sovereignty engineering. Perhaps the most striking technical achievement is the semantic depoliticisation of the transport file. The ceasefire’s “unimpeded access” language – read in Baku as license for a corridor and in Yerevan as a sovereignty alarm – was delinked from the peace text and recast as a “route” in August 2025, with contours for customs, border control, and security still under negotiation (ICG, 2025). Label, venue, and sequencing here work together: route lowers audience costs; witnessed framework raises reputational stakes; post-treaty implementation preserves flexibility.

Border delimitation sequencing. According to ICG, the parties structured delimitation from north to south – a technique to avoid early collisions at the most sensitive points. Although only ~12 km had been demarcated at the time of reporting, officials on both sides characterised the process as making “real progress” (ICG, 2025). The logic is classic: pocket early deliverables in low-salience segments, build habits of technical cooperation, and erect procedural firebreaks before tackling hotspots.

Constitutional question as a verification device. Azerbaijan’s demand that Armenia change its constitution functions not only as a trust signal but also as a domestic-level lock-in mechanism. ICG sensibly warns about the risk of over-pressure: a referendum could backfire, strengthening hard-line constituencies. The suggested compromises – sign now, ratify upon change; or take interim parliamentary steps – are verification devices that respect domestic veto players (ICG, 2025).

Law as architecture, not weapon. The agreement’s focus on territorial integrity, non-use of force, and renunciation of claims is consistent with the law surveyed in Krüger (2010): it embeds constraints into inter-state commitments rather than reviving status adjudication. It is precisely because external enforcement is unreliable that parties hew to legal minimalism – the space where compliance is most observable and least hostage to third-party politics (Krüger, 2010; ICG, 2025).

Interim synthesis. When deterrence thins, format and sequence do the heavy lifting. The South Caucasus after 2020 shows a coherent design grammar: bilateral backbone, witnessed moments, semantic engineering of sovereignty-salient files, and verification that lives inside the dyad. None of this abolishes risk; but it institutionalises enough restraint to keep the door to peace ajar (ICG, 2025).

2.2.5. Implications for the CSTO’s “Architecture of Asymmetry” and Small-State Practice

Chapter 1 argued that CSTO institutions and unwritten patronage rules tend to codify hierarchy rather than generate collective defence. The Nagorno-Karabakh case translates that claim into a process-tracing of credibility erosion and bargaining redesign.

For alliance design. The case suggests three design lessons:

1. **Instrument substitution clauses.** Where the hegemon’s enforcement is contingent, alliances should pre-imagine non-military stabilisers: third-party technical assistance mandates that survive political swings; non-deployment formulas that reduce escalation incentives; and incident-management protocols that rely on direct channels instead of armed buffers (ICG, 2025).
2. **Ratification-aware sequencing.** If credibility is thin, agreements should incorporate sign-now/ratify-later pathways and domestic de-risking options to keep political shocks from collapsing entire architectures (ICG, 2025).
3. **Venue and vocabulary hygiene.** As Minsk fatigue shows, process without power corrodes credibility. Conversely, witnessed bilateralism and semantic engineering (corridor → route) can reduce veto points while preserving principles of sovereignty (ICG, 2025).

Armenia’s trajectory shows how to negotiate survival in the absence of reliable enforcement:

- Diversify dependencies (arms, monitors, investment partners) to reconstruct a portfolio of reassurance (ICG, 2025).
- Shift from status claims to sovereignty-first minimalism with verifiable obligations – recognition, non-use of force, and the withdrawal of external legal claims – while relegating explosive files to adjacent frameworks (ICG, 2025; Krüger, 2010).
- Use symbolism (closure of legacy mandates; high-profile witnessing) as a domestic ratification tool, not as a substitute for capabilities (ICG, 2025).

Azerbaijan's case illustrates how to cash in military victories without overreaching: consolidate the legal core (integrity, non-claims), keep formats lean, deploy ratification levers with care, and tie peace to connectivity rents that are contingent on stability (ICG, 2025). The strategy does not erase grievances; it converts them into manageable risks embedded in text and economic incentives.

Krüger's legal analysis explains why integrity-first texts are internationally legible; Yavuz & Gunter's *longue durée* shows how ossified diplomacy and rhetorical maximalism narrowed the laddered compromise space pre-2020; ICG's 2025 briefing then documents the post-victory textualisation of power and the venue shift that made progress possible (Krüger, 2010; Yavuz & Gunter, 2023; ICG, 2025). Broers' long-arc reading of rivalry helps situate these moves in a system where Russia's influence remains structural even when its operational bandwidth dips (Broers, 2021).

The CSTO's paradox of solidarity – formal strength versus political fragility – manifests as selective protection and thus selective credibility. When protection is selective, negotiation becomes armour: language, venues, sequencing, and verification take on the functions that force posture would otherwise perform. The post-2020 South Caucasus shows that such armour can be crafted even when trauma is raw and distrust is deep; but it also warns that without ongoing incentives and careful ratification management, thin peace can fray (ICG, 2025).

2.3 Case Study II: The Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan Border Conflicts – Intra-Bloc Mediation Failure, Alliance Credibility, and Negotiation Design

2.3.1. Setting the Stage: Soviet Cartography, Enclaves, and Hydropolitics as Negotiation Structure

The Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan boundary is not merely a line on a map; it is a dense bundle of daily operating rules over water intakes, access roads, and pasture gates. The legacy of Soviet cartography produced exclaves (most prominently Vorukh) and overlapping administrative lines that were internally manageable in a planned economy yet highly salient after 1991. Today, the border is roughly 976 km, with a large portion historically undelimited; the persistence of indeterminate segments has repeatedly structured local friction and state-level bargaining (McGlinchey, 2021).

At the epicenter sits the Golovnoi (headworks) water intake on the Isfara/Ak-Suu, a Soviet-built sluice that allocates flows to downstream Kyrgyz and Tajik communities; successive incidents since 2014 show how “who controls the gate” quickly escalates into force protection by border services (McGlinchey, 2021).

Contemporary OSCE documentation on the Fergana hydrosystem further underlines how Vorukh-originating supply lines traverse Kyrgyz settlements before reaching Tajik Shurab—exactly the kind of embedded interdependence that turns any checkpoint or camera pole into a sovereignty signal (OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek, 2012).

Hydrologically, the Isfara is snow- and glacier-fed; seasonality, legacy canals with conveyance losses, and competing irrigation demands intensify scarcity narratives. Peer-reviewed work on Central Asian water/climate suggests that, while climate-change-induced interstate war is not structurally inevitable, earlier snowmelt and summer shortfalls are likely to increase stress in unregulated basins, magnifying the need for cooperative operating rules (Bernauer & Siegfried, 2012). Basin notes on Isfara likewise emphasize its short length, glacier contribution, and sharp seasonal peaks—parameters that put a premium on transparent release schedules and joint heads-of-water maintenance (River Basin Profile, n.d.).

Institutionally, both states are CSTO members and SCO participants, with additional OSCE border-management linkages. Yet, as Chapter 2.2 already indicated for the South Caucasus, alliance clauses that focus on external aggression are ill-fitted to bilateral boundary frictions. Article 4 of the 1992 Treaty on Collective Security conditions collective defense on “aggression by any state,” a framing that becomes contestable when firefights occur around disputed segments where each party claims defensive posture (Collective Security Treaty, 1992, art. 4). The CSTO Charter/communications reinforce priority to political means and UN-consistent action; critically, no standing, treaty-mandated good-offices or verification cell exists for intra-member boundary incidents—creating a structural mediation gap (Collective Security Treaty, 1992, arts. 1–2; OPIL, 2019).

Negotiation design, therefore, begins at the micro-level: who patrols when, where new posts are forbidden, which byroads remain civilian, how jointly read maps are compared on the ground. The local incentive structure—access to water and roads—means that interim micro-regimes (hotlines, joint patrol timings, “no new fortifications” clauses) often do more stabilizing work than high-salience summitry. This is the conceptual bridge from 2.2: when deterrent umbrellas do not clearly apply, stability rests on proceduralized cooperation rather than promises of alliance enforcement.

The chapter proceeds by tracing escalation dynamics (2021–2022), showing how alliance signaling shaped bargaining ranges and BATNAs, and then reconstructing the procedural path (“fire to text”) that culminated in the 2025 demarcation treaty—setting up 2.4’s design agenda focused on embedding operational annexes into final borders.

2.3.2. Escalation 2021–2022: From Hydrosocial Friction to Interstate Firefights – and the Law of Armed Conflict

April 2021 was the first “modern” large-scale shock. A dispute at Golovnoi over cameras and control of the sluice cascaded into multi-site skirmishes. Open-source documentation and field interviews reported over 50 fatalities and significant displacement on the Kyrgyz side; USIP’s contemporaneous analysis rightly framed the

trigger as water allocation but stressed how quickly the confrontation spread along access roads and settlements (USIP, 2021; McGlinchey, 2021; Cornell et al., 2021).

The September 2022 crisis was qualitatively different: regular forces engaged with armor, artillery, and drones across multiple sectors over four days (14–17 September). The OSCE Chairperson-in-Office on 16 September called for an immediate cessation of hostilities and offered support for de-escalation mechanisms, signaling multilateral concern but without deploying a mission (OSCE, 2022). Humanitarian reporting documented mass displacement; OCHA/ReliefWeb materials and DTM snapshots recorded more than 100,000 people affected in Batken at various points during the crisis (UN Kyrgyzstan, 2022; ReliefWeb/OCHA, 2023). HRW’s 2023 investigation catalogued apparent war crimes by both sides, including unlawful attacks on civilians and civilian objects (e.g., a laser-guided munition hitting a town square; strikes on ambulances and civilian vehicles), calling for investigations and accountability measures consistent with IHL (HRW, 2023).

From an IHL standpoint, the episodes engaged rules on distinction and precautions. The ICRC Customary IHL Study codifies the duty to distinguish between combatants and civilians (Rule 1), prohibit indiscriminate attacks (Rule 11), and take feasible precautions in attack (Rule 15); violations require effective investigation and prosecution (ICRC, 2005, Rules 1, 11, 15, & 158). HRW’s findings thus matter not only morally but institutionally: absent an accepted neutral fact-finding mechanism, reciprocal denial and nationalist narratives can harden, making later concessions politically toxic (HRW, 2023).

While the OSCE spoke early, the CSTO responded with expressions of concern and condolences in communiqués on 17 and 19 September, welcoming local protocols but avoiding interposition or mandated mediation—consistent with the treaty’s external-aggression trigger and the political sensitivity of choosing sides between two members (CSTO, 2022). As in Chapter 2.2’s South Caucasus analysis, non-activation in a bilateral sovereignty dispute erodes expectations of alliance utility in exactly the scenarios where miscalculation is likeliest.

In October 2022, Kyrgyzstan cancelled two CSTO exercises, including “Indestructible Brotherhood,” days before one was to start—a diplomatic signal about perceived misfit between alliance promises and members’ security needs during acute

border tensions (Reuters, 2022; AP, 2022). That cancellation did not imply exit, but it did recalibrate voice within the bloc: leverage through public scheduling decisions rather than private compliance.

The 2022 escalation operationalized the case's central puzzle: intense interstate violence between two CSTO members occurred while alliance communications stayed declaratory. This widened the space for bilateral micro-texts (local ceasefire rules) and humanitarian actors, while narrowing incentives for ambitious multilateral formats.

2.3.3. Alliance Diplomacy Under Strain: The CSTO's Signalling Problem and Members' Hedging

The CSTO's repertoire in 2021–2022 was limited to statements urging restraint and welcoming local agreements; there was no high-level mediator with a formal mandate, no standing incident-prevention team deployed, and no interposition force authorized. Legally, Article 4's "aggression" language is ill-posed for contested-line firefights where both parties claim self-defense, and institutionally there is no treaty-embedded good-offices mechanism with investigative powers for intra-member disputes (Collective Security Treaty, 1992, art. 4; CSTO Charter, 2002, art. 27; Rozanov, 2010).

Members read not only texts, but practices. Kyrgyzstan's October 2022 cancellations of CSTO exercises—coming on the heels of September's battles—broadcast unmet expectations regarding alliance problem-solving and deterrence value (AP, 2022; Putz, 2022). That said, neither side sought to internationalize the dispute beyond declaratory diplomacy; instead, both re-invested in border-service channels, where verification and de-confliction could be tailored to terrain, canals, and specific outposts.

The OSCE played a generic de-escalation role, while humanitarian agencies (ICRC/OCHA/UNICEF) focused on protection and relief. The workhorse forum became bilateral working groups operating under Protocol No. 42 (25 September 2022), which codified rules such as freezing certain forward positions and coordinating patrols

in sensitive sectors (24.kg, 2024; Asia-Plus, 2024). Reports summarizing these Guliston meetings in April 2024 highlighted implementation steps—joint activities, commitment reaffirmations, and topographic/legal synchronization—indicating that both governments found technical bilateralism less politically risky than alliance-mediated formats (24.kg, 2024; Asia-Plus, 2024).

Negotiation analytics helps to explain this preference. When third-party enforcement is thin, BATNAs diverge: one path prioritizes on-the-ground consolidation (control over headworks, high ground, and roads); the other prioritizes text-based incrementalism (protocols, co-validated maps, SOPs). The Kyrgyz–Tajik sequence mixed both; Protocol 42 reduced tactical friction and created a common frame for accusations and responses—even Tajik security statements critical of Kyrgyz actions referenced the protocol’s terms, showing the focal-point function of a shared text (OSCE PC – Tajikistan Delegation, 2022).

Meanwhile, HRW’s documentation of IHL breaches and OCHA’s displacement figures shaped domestic ratification costs: publics traumatized by shelling and losses are more likely to accept procedural steps that visibly lower risk than grand territorial swaps. Absent a CSTO-sponsored fact-finding cell, impartiality had to be imported through generic IHL standards rather than alliance authority (HRW, 2023; ICRC, 2005; OCHA, 2022).

The case exposes a signaling problem: when the type of threat is granular (water/roads) and the audience costs for choosing sides are high, the CSTO’s default—statements and condolences—does little to widen the bargaining space. That is not “failure” relative to Article 4’s design, but it is a failure relative to members’ expectations of managed intra-bloc peace.

2.3.4. From Fire to Text: Protocols, Joint Statements, and the 2025 Border

Treaty

Post-September 2022 stabilization proceeded in three concentric rings. **First**, local operating rules: no new checkpoints in ultra-sensitive sectors; pullbacks; synchronized patrol routes. These steps, anchored in Protocol 42, proved sufficient to

reduce immediate friction and buy time for map work (Alybekova, 2024; Asia-Plus, 2022; Eurasianet, 2022). **Second**, accelerated working-group diplomacy in 2023–2024—topographic/legal teams meeting in Batken and Guliston, issuing low-theatre joint notes that emphasized implementation and avoided performative nationalism (Alybekova, 2024; Asia-Plus, 2025). **Third**, presidential-level codification: on 13 March 2025, Presidents Japarov and Rahmon signed a demarcation deal in Bishkek, seeking to close the long-running file and reopen transport links (Reuters, 2025a). The UN Secretary-General publicly welcomed the agreement the same day, framing it as a regional stability dividend; this was important international validation without inserting an external guarantor (UN DPPA, 2025).

This sequence is not accidental. Negotiation design logic—sequencing → interim arrangements → final codification—is evident throughout. Parties purposely tackled segments where evidence (maps/usage) aligned and left symbolically charged points until later, thus building a bank of “mutual success” to spend on the hard parts. Using border-service venues (Guliston/Batken) insulated talks from alliance reputational cycles and great-power optics while letting technical teams co-validate survey points and patrol patterns (Alybekova, 2024; Asia-Plus, 2025). The 2025 treaty, as reported, also envisages reopening road, rail, and air links—confidence infrastructure that multiplies everyday peace dividends and locks in constituencies for compliance (Reuters, 2025a).

Documentation across 2023–2025 shows progress claims—e.g., initialling protocols, narrowing the undelimited share, and agreeing “cross roads” use—surfacing first from the security chiefs and working groups before presidential optics (Asia-Plus, 2025; Reuters, 2025b; 24.kg, 2025). The Diplomat’s December 2024 coverage likewise captured officials’ statements that >90% of the line had been agreed before finalization—a typical sign that the technical core was ripe for top-level signature (Putz, 2024).

A word on water: the Isfara basin notes and Eurasianet’s 2021 analysis of Golovnoi remind us that any demarcation not hard-wiring headworks access, maintenance windows, and emergency release protocols risks re-externalizing disputes to the security track (RiverBP, n.d.; Eurasianet, 2022).

2.3.5. What the Kyrgyz–Tajik Border Tells Us About Alliances: Credibility, Mediation Design, and the CSTO’s Paradox of Solidarity

Finding 1 — Legal design begets selective, not collective, protection in intra-bloc rows. The CSTO’s central legal trigger (Treaty Art. 4) is tailored for external aggression; intra-member boundary firefights fall into a gray zone where the organization has neither a standing good-offices mandate nor an investigative verification arm. The 2021–2022 episodes translated this into statements without mechanisms, which rational actors discounted (Collective Security Treaty, 1992; OSCE Chairpersonship, 2022; CSTO Secretariat, 2022).

Finding 2 — Weak alliance signaling compresses the ZOPA unless replaced by high-granularity interim texts. Protocol 42 and its Guliston-era implementation show how operational vagueness quickly hardens into agreed constraints: freezing forward posts, “no new checkpoints,” synchronized patrols. These measures lowered incident rates and created a common reference even for protest notes—functionally expanding the ZOPA from the bottom up (24.kg, 2024; Asia-Plus, 2024; Tajikistan Delegation to OSCE PC, 2022).

Finding 3 — Hydropolitics is the negotiation substrate, not a backdrop. Because the border overlays water infrastructure, stable peace requires operational annexes on headworks access, maintenance, and emergency releases, with joint monitoring and quick-reaction hotlines. Peer-reviewed water-conflict literature cautions that climate dynamics alter seasonality and increase stress in summer months in unregulated reaches, reinforcing the need for rule-based operation rather than episodic fixes (Bernauer & Siegfried, 2012; Isfara River Basin, n.d.; Eurasianet, 2022).

Finding 4 — Civilian protection and accountability shape sequencing. HRW’s documentation of apparent war crimes and OCHA’s displacement snapshots elevated political costs for any premature grand bargain. Negotiators sensibly prioritized steps that visibly reduce risk to civilians (pullbacks, patrol coordination) while deferring

sovereignty-heavy swaps—consistent with IHL duties to distinguish and to take precautions (HRW, 2023; ICRC, 2005; ReliefWeb/IFRC, 2022).

Finding 5 — The 2025 treaty’s durability hinges on embedding joint operations into demarcation. By envisaging the reopening of transport links, leaders linked sovereignty settlement to confidence infrastructure. To remain resilient across drought years, however, the treaty architecture should include map-integrated SOPs, joint incident boards, and water-operations schedules tied to the headworks—otherwise, the first summer scarcity risks pushing disputes back into the security channel (Reuters, 2025; Isfara River Basin, n.d.).

Policy and Design Implications.

1. **SIPVT inside CSTO (Standing Incident Prevention & Verification Team).** Even within current law, the CSTO could create a deployable mixed team at **member request** to document incidents with a standard template, maintain joint logs, and recommend de-confliction SOPs, borrowing from OSCE border missions (Rozanov, 2013; OSCE, n.d.).
2. **Water-Operations Annexing.** Final demarcation packages should hard-wire headworks rules (access, maintenance windows, emergency releases) and establish SMS-level hotlines at canal gates; this transforms surprises into **managed** outages (Isfara River Basin, n.d.; Eurasianet, 2022).
3. **Civ-Mil Protection Interface.** If artillery/air-delivered munitions land within pre-agreed buffers, an automatic mixed commission convenes within 48 hours with IHL checklists; this introduces accountability without internationalizing the dispute (ICRC, 2005; HRW, 2023).
4. **Venue Strategy.** Keep theatre minimal; continue Guliston/Batken technical formats until bankable drafts emerge, then upscale to political codification (24.kg, 2024; Asia-Plus, 2024).
5. **Confidence Infrastructure.** Fast-track restoration of roads/bridges and market access as ratification assets that lock in peace dividends (Reuters, 2025; UN, 2025).

The empirical record here confirms Chapter 2's core claim: when an alliance's legal trigger and repertoire are mismatched to the conflict structure, credibility depends on design—the quality of interim texts, verification routines, and operational annexes. Chapter 2.4 generalizes this into a portable negotiation toolkit for intra-bloc disputes where sovereignty, infrastructure, and everyday livelihoods are entangled.

2.4 Case Study III: The Belarus Crisis (2020) and the Kazakhstan Unrest (2022)

– Selective Intervention and the Prioritization of Regime Security

2.4.1 Belarus 2020–2022: From an Internal Legitimacy Crisis to an

Internationalized Confrontation

Belarus's 9 August 2020 presidential election produced an unprecedented legitimacy crisis, with official tallies granting Alyaksandr Lukashenka nearly 80% amid credible allegations of fraud and mass repression. (Hansbury, 2023) European and North American states responded by invoking the OSCE's human-dimension "Moscow Mechanism" to investigate abuses around the vote, underscoring how quickly the domestic confrontation acquired a diplomatic layer. (OSCE/ODIHR, 2020) The rapporteur's report documented systematic violations before, during, and after the election and urged new elections under international observation, hardening external expectations that any de-escalation would require a meaningful political process rather than cosmetic dialogue. (Benedek, 2020)

Inside Belarus, mobilization was leader-light but mass in scale, enabled by encrypted platforms and networked civil society, which complicated "classical" bargaining because the regime could claim the absence of an authorized counterpart capable of making and keeping commitments. (Hansbury, 2023) The opposition's Coordination Council tried to anchor a dialogue focal point, but arrests and exile (e.g., the abduction and jailing of Maria Kalesnikava) destroyed even the rudiments of an internal negotiation format. (Hansbury, 2023; Amnesty International, 2021). Lukashenka's public signaling – flanked by loyal security services – telegraphed a view that coercion, time, and attrition would yield victory, reducing incentives for any concessions at a table and reinforcing a regime-security payoff structure. (Hansbury, 2023)

Western diplomacy quickly coalesced around sanctions for abuses and for electoral misconduct, a repertoire that raised the costs of repression but also narrowed Minsk's short-term dependence to one principal – Moscow – thereby reducing Western leverage over day-to-day crisis management. (Hansbury, 2023; Council of the EU, 2020–2022) Russia, for its part, treated the crisis as an intra-bloc regime-security

problem, calibrating support to ensure survival of a weakened but strategically useful client while avoiding multilateralization through the CSTO that might expose intra-alliance divisions. (Hansbury, 2023)

Two Minsk decisions externalized the domestic standoff and shifted its diplomatic arena: the forced diversion of Ryanair Flight FR4978 in May 2021 (to arrest Raman Pratasevich) and the state-engineered migrant pressure on the EU's borders later that year. (Hansbury, 2023) The first constituted an attack on international civil aviation norms and triggered EU flight bans and sanctions; the second weaponized migration flows to coerce policy change but backfired by producing coordinated EU sanctions and operational counter-measures. (ICAO, 2022/2023; Council of the EU, 2021)

By early 2022, with Russian forces massed in and through Belarusian territory for the invasion of Ukraine, Minsk's bargaining space had collapsed further: a February 27 referendum stripped out neutrality and non-nuclear clauses, codifying alignment and creating legal headroom for deeper military integration with Russia. (Hansbury, 2023) The CSTO remained absent as an instrument for de-escalation inside Belarus in 2020–2021 and presented no unified line on Russia's war after February 2022, highlighting that formal "collective security" provisions are subordinated to patron-client calculus when regime security is the pivotal good. (Hansbury, 2023)

Negotiation takeaway. The internal distribution of coercive capacity (state dominance), the opposition's fragmented representation, and the patron's shadow veto combined to foreclose a classical round-table transition; "diplomacy" migrated into adjacent arenas (aviation, borders, war adjacency), where Minsk's coercive diplomacy traded international reputation for regime survival while locking in dependence on Moscow. (Hansbury, 2023; Benedek, 2020; Council of the EU, 2021)

2.4.2 Belarus's Coercive Diplomacy Outward: FR4978 and the EU Border Crisis

Belarus forced a civilian airliner to land in Minsk under a bogus bomb threat to arrest an exiled activist – a bureaucratically simple order with profound diplomatic consequences. (Hansbury, 2023) The ICAO Council's fact-finding process concluded that the bomb threat was deliberately false and that aviation safety had been endangered, creating a multilateral basis for sanctions and flight restrictions. (ICAO, 2022a; ICAO Council President, 2022b). The EU moved quickly: leaders condemned the forced landing, banned Belarusian carriers from EU airspace and airports, and designated individuals and entities linked to the operation. (European Council, 2021; Council of the EU, 2021a, 2021b)

Belarusian state bodies and aligned intermediaries facilitated travel from the Middle East and steered people to EU borders with Poland and Lithuania to manufacture pressure for sanctions relief and political recognition, a strategy EU institutions labeled a “hybrid” coercive tactic. (Hansbury, 2023; Council of the EU, 2021c, 2021d) The EU responded by broadening its listing criteria to target organizers of instrumentalized migration and by imposing a fifth package of sanctions, pairing punitive measures with emergency operational and humanitarian support to frontline states, which raised costs for Minsk without offering transactional concessions. (Council of the EU, 2021c, 2021d; European Commission, 2021a, 2021b)

Both episodes illustrate a coercive-diplomacy repertoire that purposely strikes at “high-salience” international norms (air safety, border governance) to extract policy change, but which, absent calibrated carrots, generated sanction spirals and reputational isolation that deepened Minsk's reliance on Russia. (Hansbury, 2023; ICAO, 2022a, 2022b; Council of the EU, 2021a–d)

For the dissertation's argument, the episodes are instructive precisely because the CSTO is nowhere: when an incumbent seeks to survive a domestic legitimacy crisis, Russia prefers bilateral levers to avoid airing intra-CSTO disunity and to preserve bargaining freedom, demonstrating “non-activation” as a form of selective intervention. (Hansbury, 2023).

2.4.3 Patronage, Constitutional Engineering, and War Adjacency

Bilateral rescue without alliance multilateralism. By late 2021, Minsk's dependence on Russia spanned finance, media, and security assistance, converting a contested presidency into a client with diminished agency. (Hansbury, 2023) The large-scale Russian deployments into Belarus for "exercises" became the staging platform for the 24 February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, making Belarus an enabling territory and reframing Western diplomacy toward Minsk through the lens of complicity in aggression. (Hansbury, 2023; Council of the EU, 2022a, 2022b).

Constitutional referendum (27 February 2022). A scheduled referendum removed neutrality and non-nuclear clauses, symbolically codifying alignment with Moscow and legally widening the headroom for deeper basing and force integration – a classic example of institutionalizing path dependence to reduce future bargaining space with Western actors. (Hansbury, 2023).

Public opinion and coercive domestic law. Belarusian public-opinion soundings in early 2022 suggested limited support for sending troops to Ukraine and majority aversion to deeper war entanglement; the regime responded with legal escalations (e.g., capital-punishment eligibility in certain political cases) to deter sabotage and signal resolve, tightening the internal payoff matrix against compromise. (Hansbury, 2023).

Mediation venues. The OSCE was the natural forum for human-dimension accountability, but Belarus's posture – jailing interlocutors, using airspace and borders as leverage, becoming war-adjacent – left few entry points for a credible transition format; the CSTO, publicly divided on Russia's war, offered no cover for a negotiated exit with multilateral legitimacy. (ODIHR, 2023; Hansbury, 2023).

Negotiation takeaway. Moscow structured Minsk's BATNA by underwriting regime survival and raising the costs of defection; the "price" was incremental sovereignty loss paid through *faits accomplis* (basing, doctrine, constitutional posture). (Hansbury, 2023).

2.4.4 Kazakhstan 2022: Narrative Engineering, Venue Choice, and the CSTO's Only Operational Deployment

Protests that began on 2 January 2022 over a sharp hike in LPG prices spread rapidly, aggregating long-standing grievances around inequality, corruption, and the shadow influence of former president Nursultan Nazarbayev. (Terzyan, 2022) Within days, demonstrations escalated into violent attacks on state buildings, especially in Almaty, creating a perception of authority slipping and raising the opportunity costs of delay for the incumbent. (Terzyan, 2022)

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev labeled the unrest a “terrorist” threat, declared a counter-terror operation, and shut down communications – a narrative that did more than stigmatize protesters; it functioned as a legal-political bridge to invoke Article 4 of the Collective Security Treaty, which treats an armed attack threatening security and sovereignty as a collective concern. (Terzyan, 2022; CSTO Secretariat, 6 Jan 2022; CSTO Charter, Art. 4). On 5 January Tokayev requested CSTO assistance; within hours the organization announced a “peacekeeping” mission led by Russian airborne units with small token contingents from other members – its first-ever operational deployment. (Terzyan, 2022; CSTO, 6 Jan 2022).

The mission secured critical nodes (airports, TV towers, depots) rather than confronting crowds, and exited within days, maximizing deterrent optics while minimizing occupation narratives and nationalist blowback. (Terzyan, 2022; CSTO, 13–19 Jan 2022). The OSCE Chair called for restraint, dialogue, and rights protection, but the rapid CSTO deployment and the government’s hard-security narrative constrained Western leverage during the kinetic phase. (OSCE, 5 Jan 2022).

Authorities acknowledged at least 238 dead, including 19 security personnel, and at least six deaths in custody due to torture, while international organizations criticized the “shoot-to-kill without warning” order and the lack of independent investigations. (Gov.kz, 16 Aug 2022; HRW, 7 Jan & 20 Dec 2022; U.S. State Dept., 2022/2024).

Under the CSTO umbrella, Tokayev reshuffled security leadership and moved to dilute Nazarbayev-aligned networks; in a 16 March 2022 address, he proposed constitutional reforms to limit presidential powers, strengthen parliament and

maslikhats, and bar close relatives of the president from senior posts – a post-crisis sequencing strategy designed both for domestic regrouping and for reputational repair with external partners. (Terzyan, 2022; Akorda, 16 Mar 2022; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, 16 Mar 2022).

The EU and U.S. expressed concern over lethal force and urged accountability; China backed stabilization but did not activate SCO mechanisms; Turkey convened the Organization of Turkic States but lacked crisis-response tools. (Terzyan, 2022; European Parliament, 20 Jan 2022). The deployment’s choreography signaled a de facto division of labor in Central Asia: Russia provides the hard-security umbrella; China emphasizes economic statecraft – a structure that shapes Kazakhstan’s bargaining room after crises. (Terzyan, 2022).

January 2022 compressed several moves: issue redefinition (“terrorism,” not grievance), venue engineering (CSTO rather than SCO/OTS), optics choreography (token partners, rapid exit), and sequenced reassurance (reform promises) – all levers that convert raw patron power into a minimally stable domestic bargain for the incumbent. (Terzyan, 2022; CSTO, Jan 2022; Akorda, 16 Mar 2022).

2.4.5 Comparative Synthesis: Why the CSTO Intervened in Kazakhstan but Not in Belarus – And What That Reveals About “Selective Intervention”

Across Belarus (2020) and Kazakhstan (2022), the governing logic is regime security first, but instrument choice depended on reputational cost-benefit and alliance cohesion. In Belarus, bilateral Russian patronage sufficed, and CSTO involvement would have highlighted intra-bloc divisions and invited Western scrutiny, so “non-activation” was itself a selective intervention. (Hansbury, 2023) In Kazakhstan, by contrast, an overt yet carefully bounded mission under the CSTO veneer offered reputational dividends (speed, lift, resolve) at low intra-alliance cost and enabled domestic elite re-balancing under multilateral optics. (Terzyan, 2022; CSTO, Jan 2022).

In both crises, diplomacy meant crafting the problem: what the crisis is, which determines who can act. Belarus framed international arenas (aviation, borders) to deter external pressure on domestic reform but triggered sanction spirals that deepened

dependence on Moscow. (Hansbury, 2023; ICAO; Council of EU) (eeas.europa.eu) Kazakhstan reframed distributive grievances as terrorism, enabling treaty activation and shifting the venue from domestic bargaining to alliance “peacekeeping.” (Terzyan, 2022; CSTO Charter) (OSCE) Negotiation then worked through optics (token partners, short horizon), sequencing (reform pledges after force), and audience management (domestic elites, foreign investors), rather than reciprocal concessions with a mobilized opposition (Terzyan, 2022; Akorda, 2022).

The comparison reinforces the dissertation’s core claim: the CSTO is optimized not for collective defence but for selective support to loyal incumbents when intervention can be choreographed to minimize internal dissent and external backlash (Terzyan, 2022; Hansbury, 2023). For small states inside such an asymmetric architecture, the craft is to anticipate the patron’s calculus and structure moves – framing, venue, sequencing – that either secure rapid regime-security assistance (as in Kazakhstan) or, failing that, avoid missteps that collapse remaining bargaining space (as in Belarus). (Hansbury, 2023; OSCE ODIHR, 2020/2023).

2.5. Conclusion

Chapter 2 shows that the CSTO's celebrated promise of "collective security" fragments under pressure into selective solidarity: swift, disciplined help when a friendly regime frames unrest as externally abetted disorder; hesitation or non-response when violence sits inside bilateral disputes or sovereignty-contesting wars; and declaratory support, rather than deployment, when political legitimacy—not territorial defense—is in question (Benedek, 2020; CSTO, 2022).

In the South Caucasus, the post-2020 sequence distilled this logic. Armenia's expectation of reliable alliance enforcement eroded as battlefield facts and subsequent coercive diplomacy favored Baku. Yerevan's strategy therefore migrated from patronage faith to transactional hedging: EU monitors for reassurance, diversified arms sourcing, and treaty minimalism centered on recognition, non-use of force, and renunciation of claims—while pushing high-salience files into adjacent venues and sequencing (ICG, 2025; Yavuz & Gunter, 2023). Armenia's recourse to venue engineering—retiring legacy formats and leveraging high-profile witnessing—was not symbolism for its own sake; it was ratification management in a world where alliance deterrence had thinned (ICG, 2025). The resulting picture is an alliance member turning to texts, monitors, and diversification to perform the stabilizing functions that a patron's hard power once provided (ICG, 2025).

By contrast, the Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan escalations revealed that intra-bloc border violence—tethered to hydropolitics, enclaves, and cartographic legacies—sits outside the CSTO's enforceable core. Here the organization's legal framing of "external aggression" and its political practice left members to bargain bilaterally, even as skirmishes featured combined-arms effects and civilian displacement (OSCE, 2022; USIP, 2021; HRW, 2021). In such a setting, stability depends less on deterrent umbrellas than on micro-regimes—operating rules for headworks, incident hotlines, and verification teams—none of which the CSTO presently provides at scale (FIIA, 2023; Arynova & Schmeier, 2021). The take-away is procedural: alliance credibility is contingent on the fit between mandate and conflict structure; where the problem is granular governance of water and access, deterrence without design delivers little (OSCE, 2022; FIIA, 2023).

The Belarus (2020–) and Kazakhstan (January 2022) pair makes the regime-security bias explicit. In Belarus, a legitimacy crisis triggered international scrutiny via the OSCE “Moscow Mechanism,” but no CSTO deployment; the problem was framed as domestic political order, not collective defense (Benedek, 2020). In Kazakhstan, by contrast, a member government narrated unrest as externally abetted “terrorism,” requested help, and received a rapid, time-bounded CSTO mission that secured infrastructure while local forces restored control—an archetype of managed, invited intervention in service of regime stability (CSTO, 2022).

Across these cases, three implications follow for diplomacy and negotiation. First, credibility is selective: members can expect robust action when a crisis is legible as regime security and invitation-based, but not when disputes are bilateral or when alliance action would validate contested status outcomes (ICG, 2025; Benedek, 2020). Second, instrument substitution becomes survival strategy for the vulnerable: when protection thins, states substitute toward monitors, minimalist legal cores, and carefully staged venues to manufacture predictability (ICG, 2025). Third, design beats rhetoric in intra-bloc disputes: technical incident-prevention, hydrological protocols, and verification capacity—not summitry—are the marginal fixes that would narrow escalation pathways (OSCE, 2022; FIIA, 2023).

In sum, Chapter 2 demonstrates that the CSTO is most operational when acting as a regime-security service provider under invitation, least relevant when asked to referee bilateral sovereignty contests, and normatively cautious around legitimacy crises. That pattern redefines what “collective obligations” mean in practice and explains why affected members increasingly negotiate around the alliance—through law, monitors, formats, and diversification—rather than through it (ICG, 2025; Yavuz & Gunter, 2023).

CHAPTER 3:
THE CSTO ON THE WORLD STAGE:
DIPLOMATIC RIVALRY, STRATEGIC HEDGING, AND
THE QUEST FOR LEGITIMACY

3.1 Introduction: Seeking a Place in a Multipolar World

Chapter 2 showed that the CSTO operates through a persistent hierarchy privileging regime security and Russian leadership over alliance-wide collective defense. That design was most visible in January 2022, when the Organization moved quickly in Kazakhstan at the host state’s request; leaders framed the deployment as consistent with Article 4 of the 1992 Treaty, and the peacekeeping force withdrew within roughly two weeks (Treaty on Collective Security, 1992, art. 4; CSTO, 2022a; CSTO, 2022b). Yet the same architecture has proven less cohesive in other crises, underscoring internal asymmetries that shape external behavior (Weitz, 2018).

This chapter examines how an alliance built on asymmetric patronage pursues legitimacy beyond its home region and whether it can convert diplomacy – status signaling and claims to bloc-to-bloc parity – into negotiation – durable, rule-based arrangements that others accept. Since the early 2000s, Moscow has used the CSTO to claim equivalence with NATO, occasionally proposing formal “CSTO–NATO” formats. NATO, however, suspended “all practical civilian and military cooperation” with Russia in April 2014 and has kept only episodic high-level NATO-Russia Council contacts (NATO, 2014; NATO, 2024a; NATO, 2024b). By engaging CSTO members bilaterally while eschewing bloc recognition, NATO denies the parity Moscow seeks – diplomacy meeting a negotiation veto (Gorenburg, 2011; NATO, 2024a).

At the United Nations, the CSTO has achieved a different kind of status. The General Assembly granted observer status in 2004 and has since adopted periodic resolutions on UN–CSTO cooperation – adopted without a vote in 2021 (A/RES/75/276), but by recorded vote in 2024 (A/RES/79/10: 67–8–69). This confers symbolic acceptance of the CSTO as a regional organization and a stage on which Moscow can present it as a responsible security provider. It is recognition of existence and cooperation, not of parity with NATO, and it does not translate into operational co-

mandates beyond ad hoc coordination (UNGA, 2004, A/RES/59/50; UNGA, 2021, A/RES/75/275; UNGA, 2024, A/RES/79/10; NATO, 2014; NATO, 2024a).

The Eurasian theater poses a second test: coexistence with China's institutions and instruments. The SCO–CSTO Memorandum of Understanding (2007) codified a template for coordination – especially against the “three evils” associated with the 2001 Shanghai Convention – and SCO public materials still cite the MoU as the basis for regular contacts (SCO–CSTO MoU, 2007; SCO, 2001; SCO Secretariat, 2017). In practice, a de facto division of labor has emerged: Russia retains comparative advantages in coercive tools under the CSTO umbrella, while China's BRI-linked economic statecraft shapes regional political economies via the SCO and bilateral channels. Over time, economic preponderance tends to produce political voice; that structural tension is what smaller CSTO members navigate (Gabuev, 2015; Hess, 2024). Whether the CSTO can move from diplomatic comity with the SCO to negotiated burden-sharing that preserves member autonomy remains uncertain, particularly given shifting resource balances since 2022 (Hess, 2024; SIPRI, 2025).

Seen through the diplomacy-versus-negotiation lens, three arenas concentrate the CSTO's struggle for purpose:

1. **NATO:** diplomacy seeks recognition; negotiation is withheld. NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept codifies the post-rupture environment. For smaller CSTO members, this enables engagement with Western instruments – e.g., the EU–Armenia CEPA – outside any CSTO framework, precisely because NATO avoids institutionalizing CSTO parity (NATO, 2022; EU–Armenia CEPA, 2017; NATO, 2024a).
2. **SCO/China:** diplomacy proclaims complementarity; negotiation concerns agenda-setting and resource flows. The MoU provides language for cooperation, but Beijing's outsized economic leverage – amplified by BRI – shifts incentives for Central Asian governments (SCO–CSTO MoU, 2007; SCO Secretariat, 2017; Gabuev, 2015; Hess, 2024).
3. **Smaller CSTO members:** diplomacy signals alliance fidelity; negotiation is everyday hedging across multiple partners. Kazakhstan's January 2022 episode showed the availability of Russian-led coercive insurance with a bounded

peacekeeping timeline, followed by diversified diplomatic and economic ties that restore room to maneuver (CSTO, 2022a; CSTO, 2022b; Weitz, 2018).

Two external features amplify these dynamics. First, Russia's post-2022 resource reallocation and sharply rising military outlays reshape perceptions of what the CSTO is in practice, even as formal texts present a multilateral provider of "collective security and stability" (CSTO, 2002; SIPRI, 2024; SIPRI, 2025). Second, NATO's post-2014 policy lines make it straightforward to work bilaterally with CSTO members while denying bloc parity – turning the CSTO's diplomatic strategy into a repeated game with a familiar outcome (NATO, 2014; NATO, 2024a; NATO, 2024b). In short, the CSTO's external conduct projects an internal design problem: diplomatic visibility without negotiated authority. (CSTO, 2002; SIPRI, 2025; NATO, 2024a).

3.2 A Tale of Two Blocs: The CSTO's Diplomatic Posturing toward NATO

3.2.1 Scripts, symbols, and status: how each side narrates the other

At the core of CSTO–NATO interaction lies a struggle over status recognition rather than negotiated problem-solving; Moscow has repeatedly promoted bloc-to-bloc engagement as the "appropriate" channel, a framing that seeks to validate the CSTO as NATO's Eurasian counterpart and reaffirm Russia's regional leadership (Bordyuzha, 2011, p. 4; NATO, 2014, 2016). In Russian official discourse, this recognition quest is stitched to a wider post-Cold War ambition to be treated as a co-equal pole in a multipolar system, which explains why proposals for institutional ties with the CSTO are framed as pragmatic cooperation on shared threats (terrorism, drugs, Afghanistan) but function as diplomatic status bids (MFA Russia, 2016, § II.4; Bordyuzha, 2011; CSTO, 2019). For scholars of negotiation, those bids are not invitations to bargain over concrete deliverables; they are efforts to fix the venue and identity of the interlocutors before any bargaining starts – a classic move to lock in agenda control (Weitz, 2018).

NATO's counter-narrative reads the CSTO less as a plural multilateral actor than as a Russian instrument with thin institutional autonomy; hence, bloc-to-bloc engagement risks laundering Moscow's preferences through a multilateral wrapper (Weitz, 2018). In practice, the Alliance's self-presentation emphasizes liberal values

and sovereign choice – principles that are formally embedded in the North Atlantic Treaty and subsequent strategy documents – and casts formal ties with the CSTO as incompatible with that identity while cooperation with states (through PfP/EAPC) preserves NATO flexibility and respects partner agency (NATO, 1949, art. 2; NATO, 2024a; NATO, 2024b). This is identity work as strategy: by privileging bilateralism and the NATO–Russia Council (NRC) as the only format for dealing with Moscow, the Alliance denies the CSTO the specific recognition Moscow seeks without closing all doors to functional dialogue with individual members (NATO, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c; Weitz, 2018).

From a diplomacy-versus-negotiation perspective, both sides run diplomatic scripts that foreclose bargaining. Russia’s script elevates symbols (councils, communiqués, and “peer” formats) and keeps the content purposefully broad (counter-terrorism, Afghanistan spillovers), which maximizes status payoffs if a format is conceded; NATO’s script separates recognition from coordination, offering technical cooperation to states through PfP/EAPC while withholding organizational parity for the CSTO (NATO, 2024a; NATO, 2024b; RFE/RL, 2003). Negotiation theory predicts stalemate when the “recognition of the other” is itself the prize; without a neutral third-party umbrella or a low-visibility technical venue, reputational risks dominate and neither side accepts a format that dilutes its story about who it is (NATO, 2024a, 2024b; Weitz, 2018).

The identity clash deepened after 2014. NATO suspended “all practical civilian and military cooperation with Russia” following the illegal annexation of Crimea, retaining only limited political dialogue at Ambassadorial level and above (NATO, 2014). In subsequent strategy, Russia is characterised as the most significant and direct threat to Allied security, which makes any new bloc-level experiment – even a technical one – politically costly in Brussels (NATO, 2022, para. 8). The point is not that the CSTO was ever a serious candidate for partnership; rather, the 2014 rupture erased whatever marginal political space might have existed for testing CSTO formats in areas like counternarcotics or border security (NATO, 2014; NATO, 2022, para. 8).

These scripts matter because they structure the venue politics of the relationship: if status is the stake, then controlling formats (what exists, what does not) becomes the decisive move. The next section therefore tracks how NATO’s choice for non-formats

– PfP/EAPC bilaterals and NRC with Moscow – has functioned as a de facto veto on the CSTO’s recognition strategy (NATO, 2024a; NATO, 2024b; NATO, 2024c; NATO, 2014; Weitz, 2018).

3.2.2 Formats, non-formats, and the politics of recognition

The post-Soviet history is unambiguous: whenever a bloc-to-bloc lane could have opened, the Alliance chose not to institutionalize it, preferring country-specific instruments (NATO’s PfP and the EAPC) and, for Russia alone, the NRC (NATO, 2024a; NATO, 2024b; NATO, 2016). This is not institutional drift but deliberate design. PfP – launched in 1994 and still the workhorse of NATO’s cooperative security – builds bespoke packages with individual partners and thus bypasses any Moscow-managed framework (NATO, 2024a). The EAPC provides a broad multilateral forum that still anchors policy in state-by-state engagement, not bloc recognition (NATO, 2024b). The NRC then cordons off Alliance–Russia business into its own lane, eliminating any functional rationale for creating another council with a Russian-led organization (NATO, 2016; NATO, 2024a, 2024b).

Inside NATO, Washington has repeatedly steered against legitimizing the CSTO. A telling episode came in 2009 when reporting (via leaked U.S. mission cables) suggested the United States opposed a suggestion by Secretary-General Rasmussen to float NATO–CSTO ties; U.S. reasoning was straightforward: bloc recognition would enhance a Russian-led structure of uncertain performance and recreate a Cold-War-style bloc dynamic (U.S. Mission to NATO, 2009; U.S. Department of State, 2009; see also Kucera, 2011). Regardless of one’s view of the leak, the observable policy line that followed – no NATO–CSTO format, continued reliance on PfP/EAPC and the NRC – tracks perfectly with this stance (NATO, 2014; NATO, 2024a; NATO, 2025; NATO, 2024c).

The 2014 Crimea shock then hardened non-format into doctrine. On 1 April 2014, NATO Foreign Ministers publicly suspended “all practical civilian and military cooperation with Russia,” while keeping limited political dialogue channels (NATO, 2014). Because any hypothetical NATO – CSTO mechanism would in practice be a

Russia-facing instrument – Moscow dominates the CSTO’s voice – this suspension effectively foreclosed CSTO options as well (NATO, 2014; NATO, 2022). Even when NATO leaders later clarified that the NRC itself was not formally abolished, Alliance practice since 2014 has been to keep contact sparse and issue-bounded, which leaves no political room for testing bloc-to-bloc experiments with the CSTO (NATO, 2014; NATO, 2016a/2016b; NATO, 2022; NATO, 2024).

For the CSTO, the absence of a formal working interface with NATO has been more than a diplomatic irritation; it has constrained the organization institutionally (Weitz, 2018; Rozanov & Douhan, 2013). The CSTO repeatedly signaled and proposed cooperation on counterterrorism, counternarcotics, and Afghanistan—for example, its Secretary-General formally sent a cooperation letter to NATO Headquarters on July 8, 2004, and similar overtures continued in 2009–2012, including Afghanistan-related proposals (Rozanov & Douhan, 2013; McDermott, 2012). In practice, NATO officials indicated a preference to engage bilaterally with individual member states rather than with the CSTO as an institution, leaving these overtures without a recognized landing pad (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2003; Rozanov & Douhan, 2013). Analysts argue that this lack of an institutional interface has limited the CSTO’s external recognition and influence—amounting to a strategic cost for the organization (Weitz, 2018).

Denied a formal venue, the CSTO has sought equivalence-through-display: creating the CRRF (2009), formalizing peacekeeping mandates and forces (2007/2009; 2010), and staging highly publicized exercises—capabilities as theatre—to bolster legitimacy claims; Western/NATO readings remain sceptical (CSTO, 2009; CSTO, 2010; CSTO, 2011; Weitz, 2018).

3.2.3 Capabilities as theatre: signaling via forces, exercises, and mandates

In 2009, the CSTO established the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces (CRRF) as a central, permanent-readiness and mobile element of its military toolkit, intended for rapid deployment against contingencies ranging from repelling armed attack and localising armed conflicts to counterterrorism, border reinforcement, and the

liquidation of emergency situations with humanitarian relief (CSTO, 2009, Art. 2(1), 2(3)). This profile dovetailed with an explicit status signal: President Dmitry Medvedev said the new force would be ‘adequate in size, effective, armed with the most modern weapons, and on a par with NATO forces,’ reinforcing a parity-seeking narrative (Felgenhauer, 2009; Asia-Plus, 2009). The diplomatic intent was evident in CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Bordyuzha’s calls for cooperation with NATO, including urging the two organizations to “combine their efforts” in areas like counterterrorism, and in the CSTO’s adoption of Alliance-style benchmarks (rapid reaction force and multinational drills) to advocate for bloc-to-bloc engagement based on shared capabilities rather than political divisions (Bordyuzha, 2009; McDermott, 2012). For domestic audiences, the CRRF’s regular exercises served to demonstrate collective preparedness and cohesion, projecting a sense of shared security beyond bilateral “hub-and-spokes” ties (Weitz, 2018; CSTO, 2009).

Recurring series such as Interaction (CRRF conventional drills), Rubezh (rapid deployment against notional terrorist groups in Central Asia), and Unbreakable Brotherhood (peacekeeping) are conducted under the CSTO’s annual combat training plan, receive extensive official coverage, and stress interoperability and command-and-control coherence—often under Russian command and with Russian equipment—while rehearsing scenarios from peacekeeping and counterterrorism to responses to internal crises such as separatist unrest (Weitz, 2018,; CSTO, 2024; CSTO, 2025). In tandem, the CSTO constructed legal pathways to operate under international mandates—most notably by aligning its peacekeeping component with UN standards and practices through a 2012 MoU with the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations; successive UNGA resolutions have welcomed and noted with appreciation UN–CSTO cooperation, including progress under the 2012 MoU and UN participation in CSTO peacekeeping drills (CSTO–UN DPKO MoU, 2012; UNGA 67/6 (2012); UNGA 71/12 (2016); UNGA 75/276 (2021); UNGA 77/13 (2022)). This is procedural legitimation: the CSTO accumulates neutral badges (UN language, formats, visits, and drills) and then points to these badges when arguing it deserves recognition by other organizations (UNGA A/RES/75/276, 2021; UNGA A/RES/77/13, 2022; CSTO–UNOCT MoU, 2018; CSTO–UN DPKO MoU, 2012; Weitz, 2018).

Two internal rule-making moves doubled as external signals to NATO audiences. First, on December 20, 2011, CSTO leaders stated that the deployment of any third-country military base on a member's territory would require the consent of all CSTO members; this was later formalized by the Protocol on the deployment of military infrastructure facilities signed the same day (CSTO, 2011a; CSTO, 2011b; President of Russia, 2012). Regionally, contemporaneous reporting and analysis read this as a de facto collective veto on further Western basing in Central Asia as ISAF forces prepared to draw down in Afghanistan (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2011; Kucera, 2011; Sodiqov, 2012). Second, at the December 20, 2011 Moscow session, CSTO heads noted that the unilateral deployment of strategic missile defense without legally binding guarantees could harm international security and strategic stability in Europe (CSTO, 2011). For precedent before 2011, the September 5, 2008 Moscow declaration cautioned against placing new missile-defense sites near CSTO borders (CSTO, 2008). To contextualize the wording, Russia had just called for legally binding guarantees on European BMD (Medvedev, 2011). These are not trivial: the base-consent rule requires unanimous approval for foreign bases—effectively giving Moscow a veto and thereby strengthening its bargaining power within the CSTO (Weitz, 2018). Meanwhile, CSTO leaders' Dec 20, 2011 statement warns that unilateral deployment of strategic missile defense without legally binding guarantees may harm strategic stability in Europe—echoing Russia's objections to European BMD; and the Sep 5, 2008 Moscow declaration had already cautioned against new MD sites near CSTO borders (CSTO, 2011; CSTO, 2008).

How is this theatre received in Brussels? Alliance analysts often read CSTO deployability — including the CRRF — as Russian-led in practice and more a scaffold for Moscow's power projection than a neutral provider of collective goods (Weitz, 2018). Because CSTO practice frequently reflects regime-security priorities, its peacekeeping branding has not dispelled doubts about political intent (Weitz, 2018). In line with this, NATO engages CSTO member states individually rather than via the CSTO, through bilateral partner frameworks such as PfP and other programmes (NATO, 2024a; 2024b).

The dynamic was most visible around Afghanistan: NATO pursued bilateral reverse-transit arrangements with Central Asian partners (noted at Chicago 2012),

while the CSTO adopted a collective-consent rule for any third-country bases on member territory — a policy friction over logistics, access and veto power (NATO, 2012; CSTO, 2011).

3.2.4 Afghanistan, transit, and the de facto negotiation over access

Afghanistan exposed the core asymmetry in CSTO–NATO relations: NATO could achieve what it needed – transit, basing, reverse flows – without a bloc counterpart by striking bilateral deals with Central Asian states; the CSTO could constrain but not compel, largely by raising the political costs of Western presence for its members (Weitz, 2018). In 2012, as Pakistan routes became politically fragile, the Alliance reached agreements with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan for “reverse transit” out of Afghanistan, underlining how NATO’s logistics machine defaults to state-by-state arrangements (NATO, 2012a; RFE/RL, 2012; Reuters, 2012). Kyrgyzstan’s Manas Transit Center illustrates the pattern: after a decade of renegotiations and episodic rent disputes, Bishkek terminated the agreement and the U.S. closed the facility in 2014 – an outcome widely read as reflecting both local politics and Russian leverage but secured entirely through bilateral legal acts, not any bloc-to-bloc procedure (Cooley, 2012; U.S. Department of State, 2009; RFE/RL, 2013; Reuters, 2014; U.S. Air Force, 2014).

The CSTO’s December 2011 decision that any new third-country base on member soil requires unanimous assent functioned as a collective signal aimed at tightening that access environment (CSTO, 2011). By translating the politics of Western presence into a bloc-level consensus requirement, Moscow effectively acquired an *ex ante* veto over future basing even if a host government found bilateral terms attractive (CSTO, 2011; Weitz, 2018). The decision did not retroactively cancel existing deals, nor could it bind sovereign parliaments; but as coordination technology it reshaped member calculations and gave domestic elites a reason to point to “CSTO discipline” when managing Western requests (CSTO, 2011; Reuters, 2014). This is classic venue-engineering in negotiations: move the decision to a forum you dominate

(consensus under Russian hegemony) to constrain alternative bargains (CSTO, 2011; Weitz, 2018).

On the Alliance side, Afghanistan logistics showcased why NATO vetoed the venue. Even at the height of operational need, the Alliance handled transit through PfP/EAPC partners and specific SOFAs/MOUs with governments, not through any CSTO channel (NATO, 2024a; NATO, 2024b; Rasmussen, 2012). This kept leverage with individual capitals, reduced the risk that Moscow could convert bloc recognition into bargaining chips, and lowered reputational exposure to illiberal practices by a Russian-led alliance (NATO, 2024a, 2024b; Weitz, 2018). After 2014, when NATO suspended practical cooperation with Russia, the logic hardened: if the Russia lane is largely closed, a CSTO lane – politically indistinguishable from Russia in Allied eyes – is unavailable by construction (NATO, 2014; NATO, 2022; NATO, 2024a, 2024b; Weitz, 2018).

From a diplomacy-and-negotiation lens, Afghanistan is the empirical proof that recognition politics trumped functional bargaining. Where interests overlapped (e.g., interdiction of narcotics and border management), a rationalist model would predict at least low-visibility deconfliction. Instead, NATO relied on bilateral tracks and neutral umbrellas (UN/OSCE formats) where necessary, while the CSTO invested in declaratory coordination and its own anti-drug operations to claim performance without conceding internal control (UNGA, 2012, A/RES/67/6; UNGA, 2016, A/RES/71/12; UNGA, 2022, A/RES/77/13). In short: managed parallelism replaced negotiation, with both sides optimizing for venue control and reputational insulation rather than joint problem-solving (Weitz, 2018; UNGA, 2012, A/RES/67/6; UNGA, 2016, A/RES/71/12; UNGA, 2022, A/RES/77/13; UNODC, 2018).

If partnership is structurally blocked, what can a negotiation agenda for managed rivalry look like? The final sub-chapter distils a practical menu – formats that keep status off the table while containing risks – so that 3.3 can then pivot to how CSTO–SCO interplay complicates even these minimal possibilities. (Weitz, 2018; NATO, 2022).

3.2.5 Beyond theatrics: a negotiation agenda for managed rivalry

Principle 1: Separate recognition from coordination. A workable agenda must keep the *status question* out of scope. That means *no* attempt to create a “NATO–CSTO Council,” *no* bloc labels, and *no* language implying equivalence (Weitz, 2018). Instead, where interests measurably overlap – counter-narcotics spillovers from Afghanistan, disaster response deconfliction, or border incident hotlines – technical contact can occur under UN or OSCE umbrellas, using existing UNGA-endorsed cooperation tracks with the CSTO as legal cover (NGA, 2012, A/RES/67/6; UNGA, 2016, A/RES/71/12; UNGA, 2022, A/RES/77/13). This respects NATO’s identity constraint (no recognition of a Russian-led sphere) while allowing working-level professionals to solve mundane problems (Weitz, 2018; UNGA, 2012, A/RES/67/6; UNGA, 2016, A/RES/71/12; UNGA, 2022, A/RES/77/13).

Principle 2: Default to bilateralism but codify guardrails. NATO’s long-standing practice has been to work with CSTO member states as sovereign partners through the PfP/EAPC frameworks while engaging Russia via the NATO–Russia Council (NRC); this approach produced concrete results for Afghanistan logistics— notably the 2012 expansion of NATO–Russia transit by air, road and rail via the Ulyanovsk hub—and it preserved flexibility by relying on tailored, partner-specific arrangements rather than any CSTO channel (NATO, 2024a; NATO, 2024b; NATO, 2013). To reduce zero-sum spirals, participating States could, within OSCE formats, articulate informal “rules of the road” consistent with existing commitments: (i) no State should strengthen its security at others’ expense and each State is free to choose its security arrangements; and (ii) bloc procedures should not be invoked to negate pre-existing lawful agreements concluded by individual States. This proposal is grounded in the Charter for European Security (para. 8), the Astana Commemorative Declaration, the Platform for Co-operative Security (on transparent, modality-consistent cooperation among organizations), and the Helsinki Final Act clause that the Declaration does not affect existing treaty obligations (OSCE, 1999a, para. 8; OSCE, 2010, para. 3; OSCE, 1999b, pp. 43–44; CSCE, 1975, p. 3). Even if OSCE commitments are political rather than legal, codifying them as shared “talking points” can still structure practice: they give negotiators a ready, practical-cooperation track inside NATO’s PfP/EAPC

formats and partnership tools (menus, ITPPs, dialogue fora), keeping work on substance rather than institutional status; and, anchored in Helsinki/Astana principles, they signal that bloc procedures (e.g., the CSTO’s 2011 unanimous-consent rule on third-country basing) should not be invoked to unwind lawful bilateral agreements already in force. (OSCE/ODIHR, 2001; NATO, 2024a; NATO, 2025b; NATO, 2024c; CSCE, 1975; OSCE, 1999a; OSCE, 2010; CSTO, 2011).

Principle 3: Issue-bound technicality, not grand bargains. The negotiating agenda should be *small, testable, and reversible*. Examples include (i) UN-facilitated information-sharing on large-scale drug interdictions that cross CSTO borders and implicate Allied destinations; (ii) deconfliction playbooks for simultaneous disaster-relief deployments in third countries; and (iii) staff-to-staff observation of exercises under UN labels to certify compliance with peacekeeping standards, not to create political parity (UNGA, 2022, A/RES/77/13, Preamble & OP2; 2016, A/RES/71/12, OP6). These are precisely the types of contacts the UNGA has “noted with appreciation” in past cooperation resolutions (UNGA, 2012, A/RES/67/6; UNGA, 2016, A/RES/71/12; UNGA, 2022, A/RES/77/13).

Principle 4: Agree on what not to negotiate. Enlargement doctrine, missile-defense architecture, and bloc recognition are identity-defining issues for NATO and core leverage for Moscow; putting them on any CSTO-linked agenda guarantees failure and reputational blowback (NATO, 2010; NATO, 2022). The very fact that the 2010 and 2022 Strategic Concepts bracket Russia in sharply different ways underscores why these files cannot be outsourced to a Russia-led alliance format without contradicting Allied strategy (NATO, 2010; NATO, 2022).

Principle 5: Keep an eye on audience costs inside CSTO states. The Alliance’s choice of bilateral tracks is not simply self-interest; it also reflects how CSTO members hedge for autonomy by cultivating relations with multiple external partners (Weitz, 2018). Over-politicizing “CSTO recognition” would narrow those states’ room to maneuver and strengthen Moscow’s gatekeeping narrative. Conversely, quiet bilateralism – embedded in PfP/EAPC routines and UN/OSCE umbrellas – lets smaller members translate their multi-vector diplomacy into concrete benefits without publicly defecting from CSTO obligations (NATO, 2024a, 2024b; Weitz, 2018).

The CSTO's posturing toward NATO is a *status campaign* constrained by its own asymmetries; NATO's response is a *venue strategy* that privileges bilateralism and neutral umbrellas while refusing organizational parity. The one domain where this stalemate is partially mitigated – UN-grounded technical coordination – remains narrow by design. Chapter 3.3 now widens the aperture to the CSTO's other great comparator, the SCO, where Russia's "hard security" primacy rubs against China's economic leverage and where even modest UN-style coordination can be complicated by Sino-Russian rivalry over who sets Eurasia's rules. (Weitz, 2018; NATO, 2022).

3.3. The Dragon and the Bear: CSTO's Complex Relationship with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)

3.3.1 Institutional Design as Negotiated Power: Why the Mandates Diverge

The CSTO's legal core is mutual defense; the SCO's is sovereignty and non-interference. Article 4 of the 1992 Collective Security Treaty codifies a collective-defense obligation – aggression against one is aggression against all – anchoring a classical alliance identity (Treaty on Collective Security, 1992, art. 4). By contrast, the SCO Charter and the 2001 founding Declaration emphasize mutual trust, equality, consultation, and respect for sovereignty, explicitly disavowing alliance structures or targeting third states (SCO Heads of State Declaration, 2002; SCO Charter, 2002, art. 2). In effect, the founding texts encode different diplomatic grammars: CSTO as coercible solidarity; SCO as consensual security governance. (Weitz, 2018).

Instrumentally, the organizations build different toolkits. Since 2009, the CSTO has fielded a Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF) with Russian airborne units as its backbone, tasked to repel aggression, conduct special operations, protect critical infrastructure, and support emergency response, all under Collective Security Council authorization (Weitz, 2018; Agreement on the CSTO CRRF, 2009, art. 2(3); art. 4; CSTO, 2009, RFE/RL, 2009). The CSTO has also developed UN-compatible peacekeeping modalities to buttress legitimacy for deployments labeled as peace operations (UN Security Council, 2022, S/PV.8967). The SCO, by contrast, built the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent as an operational center for information exchange, watchlisting, and coordination against the “three evils” (terrorism, separatism, extremism), and it routinizes Peace Mission counter-terrorism drills designed around inter-agency cooperation rather than interstate warfighting (SCO Charter, 2002, art. 10; Shanghai Convention, 2001; SCO Secretariat, 2018; Maduz, 2018).

Procedure functions as power. In December 2011, CSTO heads announced a consensus that third-country bases in any member would require the consent of all CSTO states (RFE/RL, 2011; CSTO, 2011). Independent reporting the next day likewise described it as a “tentative agreement” and noted that leaders “did not sign any agreement” and that formal approval timing was unclear (RFE/RL, 2011). Subsequent

instruments formalized the rule via the Protocol on the deployment of military infrastructure facilities (President of Russia, 2012; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2012), while contemporaneous analysis summarized the decision as requiring “the full consent of all CSTO member states” (Rozanov & Douhan, 2013, p. 16). The SCO’s consensus rule and non-alliance posture protect national autonomy and lower hedging costs: decisions are taken by consensus (SCO Charter, 2002, art. 16); the Organisation is neither a bloc nor a closed alliance and is not directed against other states (SCO Heads of State Declaration, 2002; SCO Charter, 2002, art. 2).

Formal links stop short of integration. In October 2007 the SCO and CSTO Secretariats signed a Memorandum of Understanding pledging information exchange and dialogue, but the text created no joint command, no shared forces, and no mutual obligations, reflecting a preference for contact without subordination (SCO–CSTO MoU, 2007). Moscow preserves alliance primacy over hard security via the CSTO; Beijing preserves SCO distinctiveness and agenda control over internal security and development issues (Cooley, 2012).

Diplomacy & negotiation take-away. The divergence is not accidental or merely functional; it is the product of bargaining over status, veto, and who gets to “own” specific problem-sets (hard defense vs. internal security). Beijing openly underscores that the SCO is non-alliance, non-confrontation, and not directed against third parties; Moscow channels hard-defense through the CSTO and uses it to limit Beijing’s military role and to retain a de-facto veto via the CSTO (Xi, 2025; Weitz, 2018).

3.3.2 Process-Tracing the Stress Tests: How Episodes Revealed the Rules

Astana 2005 – U.S. basing and color-revolution anxieties (SCO). The SCO Astana Declaration urged that “coalition” participants set a timeline for temporary basing in Central Asia, a signal widely understood as nudging the United States toward drawdown while asserting regional voice against perceived external interference (SCO Astana Declaration, 2005). Moscow and several Central Asian leaders used the SCO’s multilateral cover to express regime-security concerns triggered by the “color revolutions,” without the diplomatic costs of unilateral confrontation (Cooley, 2012). The episode illustrates forum selection as negotiation: an SCO statement lets Russia

and local regimes socialize a sovereignty narrative without tying CSTO hands to specific hard-security commitments (SCO Astana Declaration, 2005).

Dushanbe 2008 – Territorial integrity vs. recognition (SCO). After the August 2008 war with Georgia, Moscow sought diplomatic validation for recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but the SCO reaffirmed territorial integrity and studiously avoided endorsing recognition (SCO Dushanbe Declaration, 2008). Beijing’s own separatism sensitivities and the SCO’s sovereignty-first script supplied the normative firewall that smaller members could shelter behind, revealing a hard limit on using the SCO to legitimate faits accomplis that clash with its principles (SCO Dushanbe Declaration, 2008). The negotiation logic is clear: the SCO can amplify anti-interference messages; it will not validate boundary-changing moves (Cooley, 2012).

Kyrgyzstan 2010 – A request denied (CSTO). When ethnic violence threatened state breakdown, Bishkek appealed to the CSTO for intervention, but the organization declined to deploy a combat/peace enforcement operation, citing the conflict’s internal character and the political risks of open-ended involvement (International Crisis Group, 2010). The non-intervention underscored that CSTO activism is hegemon-gated: capacity existed via CRRF, but political will and risk calculus in Moscow decided the outcome (Weitz, 2018; International Crisis Group, 2010). (Weitz, 2018; International Crisis Group, 2010). This is negative coordination by inaction – a bargaining outcome in which doing nothing preserves flexibility and avoids entrapment (International Crisis Group, 2010).

Kazakhstan 2022 – A rapid, limited deployment (CSTO) and a synchronized narrative (SCO/China). In January 2022, after President Tokayev framed unrest as externally abetted terrorism, the CSTO approved and executed a limited peacekeeping deployment within hours, protecting strategic sites and withdrawing within days after stabilization – a showcase of procedurally “legalized” rapid response (CSTO Press Service, 2022; Russian MFA, 2022; President of Russia, 2022). China, for its part, delivered a verbal message from Xi Jinping supporting Kazakhstan’s stability and condemning external interference, aligning SCO-style sovereignty rhetoric with CSTO hard-security action without entering an alliance posture (PRC MFA, 2022). This sequenced cooperation – CSTO as the first responder,

SCO/China as political legitimizer – exposes the division of labor as a practical bargain rather than a paper design (CSTO Press Service, 2022; PRC MFA, 2022).

The CSTO's 2011 "allies' consent" line on third-country bases helped close the window for new Western facilities; Kyrgyzstan's Manas transit center was ultimately closed in 2014 following parliamentary action and a negotiated U.S. withdrawal, illustrating how bloc signaling and local politics interact (RFE/RL, 2011; Reuters, 2013; USAF, 2014). The SCO, by contrast, voiced generalized regional preferences (2005) but has not tried to operate as a hard-security basing coordinator, again reflecting its non-alliance DNA (SCO, 2005).

Across these episodes, Moscow used the CSTO to signal capability and discipline when risks were acceptable (Kazakhstan 2022) and to withhold when they were not (Kyrgyzstan 2010), while Beijing used the SCO to enforce sovereignty norms and shape narratives without assuming combat commitments (2008, 2022) (International Crisis Group, 2010; SCO 2008; PRC MFA 2022). The pattern reflects managed competition through scope control rather than merger or hierarchy (Weitz, 2018).

3.3.3 Venues, Procedures, and the Craft of Bargaining

In the CSTO, the Collective Security Council, Council of Defense Ministers, and Secretariat/Joint Staff design and authorize deployments, with Russia as the pivotal agenda-setter given its force contribution and logistics (CSTO, 2002, arts. 11–12, 18, 18¹; CSTO, 2022; Weitz, 2018). In the SCO, policy is channeled through the Council of Heads of State/Government, the Secretariat (Beijing), and RATS (Tashkent) – with consensus and non-interference shaping outputs (SCO, 2002, arts. 4, 10–11, 16, 2). Both organizations maintain UN linkages – the SCO as a GA-recognized regional organization with recurrent GA resolutions on cooperation; the CSTO via UN-compatible peacekeeping arrangements and Security Council debates on regional organizations – allowing third-party umbrellas for limited coordination without status contests (UNGA, 2004, A/RES/73/334; UNGA, 2022, A/77/13; UN Security Council, 2022, S/PV.8967).

Efforts to establish formal CSTO–NATO links repeatedly stalled—NATO consistently rejected joint initiatives—while CSTO–SCO engagement remained limited rather than operational. (Weitz, 2018). The 2007 SCO–CSTO Memorandum of Understanding codified consultations, information exchange, and joint programs on an ‘equal and constructive’ basis, institutionalizing dialogue rather than integration. (SCO–CSTO MoU, 2007, §§ II–III; Weitz, 2018).

In December 2011, CSTO leaders announced that hosting any non-CSTO military infrastructure would require the consent of all allies; in practice this gives Moscow a veto on foreign basing.” (RFE/RL, 2011; Weitz, 2018). The SCO decides by consensus (SCO Charter, art. 16). At the Dushanbe summit (28 Aug 2008), the declaration voiced concern and supported Russia’s role but stopped short of recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia — illustrating how consensus preserves members’ discretion on recognition. (SCO Charter, 2002; SCO, 2008; RFE/RL, 2008). Plans to synchronize drills across SCO and CSTO have not advanced: per reporting on 2007, China blocked a proposed joint SCO–CSTO exercise; more broadly, CSTO–SCO cooperation has remained modest. (Weitz, 2012; Weitz, 2018). As Weitz notes, the CSTO and SCO are potentially competitive organizations with limited collaboration, which makes each body’s procedures consequential for outcomes. (Weitz, 2018).

Both organizations claim stakes in post-ISAF Afghanistan but approach them differently: CSTO emphasizes border security and potential contingency deployments; SCO emphasizes counter-terror finance, RATS information sharing, and regional political signaling (Weitz, 2018; SCO, 2002, Art. 6(3)–(5), Art. 7; UN CTED, 2019; SCO, 2021). UN venues have been used to acknowledge the SCO’s role without prejudicing CSTO prerogatives, a classic third-party umbrella for managed coexistence (UNGA, 2019, A/RES/73/334).

Reports since 2019 document a limited Chinese security presence in eastern Tajikistan near the Wakhan corridor and a 2021 agreement to fund a Tajik police outpost, signaling incremental hard-security capacity pursued bilaterally rather than through the SCO (Shih, 2019; RFE/RL, 2021; Bloomberg, 2021). Reporting shows that when Beijing expanded its security role beyond routine SCO activities near the Afghan–Tajik border, it did so through discreet bilateral arrangements—often via the

People's Armed Police—and proceeded cautiously so as not to provoke Moscow. (Shih, 2019; RFE/RL, 2021).

The CSTO–SCO interface is venue shopping under constraints: patrons and small states place issues in the forum whose procedural DNA favors their goals – CSTO for coercible defense and basing control; SCO for sovereignty signaling, law-enforcement cooperation, and economic corridor legitimation (Treaty on Collective Security, 1992, Art. 4; RFE/RL, 2011; SCO Charter, 2002, Art. 16; SCO CHS, 2018).

3.3.4 Small-State Portfolio Diplomacy: Hedging Across Two Forums

With CSTO offering hard-security backstops and SCO offering economic access and sovereignty-protective norms, Central Asian governments practice portfolio diplomacy – sequencing asks, labeling cooperation to suit domestic audiences, and forum-shopping to offset both Russian and Chinese asymmetries (Cooley, 2012; Weitz, 2018).

Astana relies on the CSTO for last-resort stabilization (CSTO, 2022) while branding itself the “buckle” of the Belt and Road (Runde, 2015) through SCO-framed economic and connectivity initiatives and CNPC-backed pipelines (China National Petroleum Corporation [CNPC], 2020), thereby raising the political cost for either patron to coerce (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China [PRC MFA], 2022). Energy corridors – Kazakhstan–China oil pipeline and the Central Asia–China Gas Pipeline – have multiplied Chinese leverage but also deepened interdependence, giving Kazakhstan bargaining chips in both forums (CNPC, n.d.-a; CNPC, n.d.-b; KCP, n.d.).

The decade-long Manas story shows hedging through terminable access: Bishkek extracted rents and eventually closed the U.S. transit center in 2014 as CSTO gatekeeping hardened and domestic politics shifted (Dzyubenko, 2013; USAF, 2014). The SCO's sovereignty script provided narrative cover for closure, while the CSTO's unanimity signal changed the default expectation about long-term Western presence (SCO, 2005; RFE/RL, 2011).

Dushanbe hosts a large Russian base and leans on the CSTO for border security; simultaneously, it has welcomed Chinese financing and tolerated a narrow Chinese

security footprint near the Afghan frontier – moves channeled outside the SCO to avoid reshaping the SCO’s non-alliance identity (TASS, 2024; RFE/RL, 2021; Shih, 2019). The strategy is compartmentalization: CSTO for existential threats and alliance signaling; bilateral China for site-specific internal and border security enhancements; SCO for political shielding against interference narratives (SCO, 2002).

While not a current CSTO member, Uzbekistan is an SCO founding member and leverages the SCO for connectivity and investment while keeping defense alignments shallow, thereby preserving bargaining autonomy vis-à-vis Moscow (SCO, 2002; Cooley, 2012). This underscores that SCO membership without CSTO obligations is a designed option for states preferring sovereignty protection over alliance discipline (SCO, 2002).

Public unease over opaque debts and labor practices in Chinese-funded projects has often complicated elites’ SCO-branded economic agenda, while reliance on the CSTO embeds collective-approval rules that give Moscow a de facto veto over outside security partnerships. Meanwhile, RATS-based cooperation—through blacklists and expedited transfers under broad ‘three evils’ definitions—raises civil-liberties and reputational risks for participating governments. (Cooley, 2012; Weitz, 2018; HRW, 2006; FIDH, 2012).

Small states are not pawns; they are portfolio managers using two institutions to extract resources, deter domination, and sequence concessions – precisely because the CSTO and SCO were designed not to collapse into one format (Cooley, 2012; Weitz, 2018).

3.3.5 A Fragile, Negotiated Division of Labor: Where the Edges Fray – and Why It Matters

CSTO as military instrument of Russian primacy; SCO as normative-political and internal-security instrument aligned with China’s rise (Weitz, 2018; SCO RATS, n.d.). It has worked because it permits mutual de-escalation: Russia preserves command prerogatives without confronting China’s economic predominance; China expands region-shaping influence without assuming alliance burdens (Cooley, 2012; Weitz, 2018).

Three stressors now test the bargain.

1. **Shifting asymmetry.** Post-2022, Russia's economic constraints have widened its dependence on China (CFR, 2025). Meanwhile, Beijing has incrementally deepened bilateral security tools (outposts, police facilities) rather than militarizing the SCO—subtly narrowing CSTO's previously exclusive “hard” lane (CFR, 2025; Shih, 2019; Bloomberg, 2021; RFE/RL, 2021).
2. **New threat classes.** Cyber intrusions, disinformation, climate-security risks, and water-resource disputes sit awkwardly with the CSTO's war-fighting/peacekeeping focus and the SCO's counter-terror orbit, leaving coordination seams that UN-regional cooperation debates acknowledge and that OSCE platforms (ICT CBMs, water diplomacy, climate-security projects) can help bridge via narrowly scoped liaison mechanisms.” (Security Council Report, 2022, S/PV.8967; UNGA, 2019, A/RES/73/334; OSCE PC.DEC/1202, 2016; OSCE, n.d.)
3. **Regional agency post-Ukraine.** Central Asian states have diversified their diplomatic exposure and sought more policy space from Moscow, creating openings for China, the EU, Türkiye, and India—thereby expanding outside options and complicating forum-shopping across overlapping institutions (East Asia Forum, 2023; IISS, 2023; AP, 2025; EEAS, 2022; OTS, 2022; MEA, 2022/2025; Cooley, 2012; Weitz, 2018).

To avoid mandate creep turning into forum collision, patrons and smaller states can operationalize existing instruments by: **(a)** reaffirming a practical division of labor in line with current SCO–CSTO cooperation areas and information-exchange mechanisms; **(b)** using UN-anchored consultations—as encouraged by the General Assembly—to develop concrete liaison modalities for technical deconfliction; and **(c)** agreeing politically on a non-interference understanding between formats, consistent with their existing MoU-based cooperation, while keeping each body within its established remit. (UNGA, 2019, A/RES/73/334; SCO–CSTO MoU, 2007).

The upshot for the dissertation's diplomacy-first thesis is straightforward: the CSTO–SCO relationship is Eurasian security governance – the day-to-day bargaining over which venue frames which problem, under which rule, and with whose veto (Weitz, 2018; Cooley, 2012).

3.4. The Hedging Game: How Smaller Members Use External Relations to Balance Russia

3.4.1. Kazakhstan's Multi-Vectorism as Negotiated Autonomy

Far from rhetoric, Kazakhstan's multi-vector doctrine functions as a bargaining strategy: Astana anchors hard security in CSTO membership, diversifies defence ties via NATO's PfP and a 2006 IPAP, locks in EU legal-economic interdependence through the EU–Kazakhstan EPCA (in force 1 March 2020), and channels China's rise through SCO frameworks and BRI corridors traversing Kazakhstan—thereby preserving manoeuvre space without outright defection (Hanks, 2009; Stronski & Ng, 2018; NATO, 2006; NATO, 2024; EEAS, 2020; World Bank, 2020; CSTO, n.d.).

Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy Concept 2020–2030 codifies multi-vectorism as a state policy, highlighting pragmatic engagement across major poles and rule-of-law instruments to lock in predictability (Government of Kazakhstan, 2020). The presidency publicly restates this strategy as part of the “New Kazakhstan” agenda, linking foreign policy diversification to domestic renewal (Akorda, 2022a; Akorda, 2022b). Political-science analyses of UN General Assembly voting profiles confirm methodical balancing behaviors over 2007–2022 (Yuneman, 2023).

Astana keeps the CSTO as its hard-security anchor – accepting Russian leadership while curating activation thresholds (Weitz, 2018). In January 2022, when domestic unrest threatened regime stability, Kazakhstan requested a limited CSTO peacekeeping deployment, which arrived within hours and withdrew within days after securing critical sites (CSTO Press, 2022a; CSTO Press, 2022b). The Secretariat also notified the UN, OSCE and SCO the next day – an intentional move to socialize the mission under multilateral umbrellas and reduce reputational costs (CSTO Press, 2022c). This procedural diplomacy – request, rapid deployment, rapid exit, third-party notification – illustrates hedging: use Russian-led capacity but bound it institutionally and temporally (Kriener, 2023; Syssoyeva, 2023).

Since 1994 Kazakhstan has cooperated with NATO under PfP; since 31 January 2006 it has used an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) to structure reforms, training and interoperability, particularly for non-Article 5 crisis-response/peace-support roles (NATO, 2022; NATO, 2025). Official Kazakh sources detail priority

tracks – IPAP, PARP, OCC – covering doctrine development, civil emergency planning, and peacekeeping, including the Steppe Eagle exercise lineage (Kazakh MFA Brussels, n.d.; NATO, 2014; Weitz, 2013). Academic overviews confirm that Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian state with an IPAP track record across four iterations pre-2014, thereby building Western professionalization options without alliance commitments (NATO, 2014; Bağbaşıoğlu, 2014). This is classic hedging: accrue capabilities and contacts that do not violate CSTO obligations but complicate future Russian coercion (Weitz, 2018).

The EU–Kazakhstan Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) – in force since 1 March 2020 – covers 29 sectors, deepening legal approximation and market access and providing a rule-based counterweight to purely geopolitical ties (Council of the EU, 2020; EEAS, 2020; EUR-Lex, 2016). The legal text and EU notices stress institutional dialogue and regulatory convergence – devices that raise the costs of abrupt geopolitical swing and anchor Kazakhstan in European regimes (EUR-Lex, 2016). Multi-vectorism thus extends beyond security to law-of-the-books hedging, an under-appreciated form of negotiating time against external shocks (Cummings, 2003).

Kazakhstan engages China through SCO diplomacy and BRI corridors while preserving security primacy for the CSTO – mirroring the “division of labor” mapped in 3.3 (Bossuyt & Kaczmarek, 2021). This calibrates dependence: infrastructure and trade with China, hard-security with Russia, and standards/training with the EU/NATO—three legs of a balancing stool (Vanderhill, Joireman & Tulepbayeva, 2020; Weitz, 2018; NATO, 2006/2022; EUR-Lex, 2016).

Negotiation takeaways (Kazakhstan). (1) Instrument diversity – CSTO for crisis; NATO/IPAP for professionalization; EPCA for legal ballast – maximizes options at acceptable recognition costs to Russia (NATO, 2022; EEAS, 2020; CSTO Press, 2022). (2) Proceduralizing Russian help (Kazakhstan 2022) converts power asymmetry into bounded service provision (CSTO Press, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). (3) Multi-vectorism operates as continuous negotiation, not neutrality – sequencing ties so that no single patron monopolizes leverage (Yuneman, 2023).

3.4.2. Armenia's Contingent Hedging and the Turn to Legal-Institutional

Anchors

Armenia has attempted to hedge inside the CSTO while cultivating legal-institutional ties with the EU and NATO, and – since 2023/2024 – has shifted toward exit-threat hedging (freezing participation, joining the ICC) to regain bargaining leverage amid acute security disappointments (NATO, 2024; European Commission, 2021; Popeski, 2024; The Guardian, 2024).

A founding signatory of the 1992 Treaty (CSTO, 1992), Armenia long treated CSTO membership as security insurance against Azerbaijan (Garibov, 2019). However, the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and subsequent border crises created a perception in Yerevan that the CSTO would not or could not deliver deterrence or crisis management in Armenia's favor, triggering a strategic reassessment (Pashinyan, 2024; Reuters, 2024; Górecki, 2024). In February 2024, Prime Minister Pashinyan stated that Armenia had frozen participation in CSTO activities due to failures to uphold Armenia's security (Popeski, 2024). By June 2024, he announced the government's intention to leave the CSTO, though procedural end-points remained debated (AP, 2024; Górecki, 2024). Local analytical centers describe this as effective suspension – budget non-payment, cancelled exercises – without immediate treaty withdrawal, thereby preserving some legacy privileges (Górecki, 2024).

Armenia has been a PfP participant since 1994, engaging NATO in defense education, peacekeeping, and standardization – capabilities beneficial for UN missions and interoperability without alliance politics (NATO, 2024; NATO, 2025). This track never promised hard guarantees (White House, 1994), but expanded networks and professional capital, a hedging layer vis-à-vis Russia (Preiherman, 2021; Pipoyan & Meibauer, 2025).

EU legalism: CEPA. The EU–Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) (signed 2017; largely in force from 2018; full legal corpus available on EUR-Lex) embeds Armenia in EU *acquis*-approximation across governance, justice, and economic regulation – a juridical hedge that builds Western ties without NATO membership (Council of the EU, 2018/2021; EEAS, 2021). Civil-society monitors track progress across rule-of-law chapters, indicating behavioral

convergence even as security remained CSTO-anchored until recently (Open Society Foundations – Armenia et al., 2021).

A legal exit-threat: ICC accession. In 2024, Armenia joined the ICC, a move with significant signaling value given the ICC warrant for Russia’s head of state; Yerevan formally argues the step addresses accountability needs vis-à-vis Azerbaijan, but the bargaining effect vis-à-vis Moscow is unavoidable (The Guardian, 2024). This is hedging by law: adopting legal commitments that raise the reputational cost of Russian heavy-handedness while not yet abandoning the CSTO treaty shell (Górecki, 2024).

A new U.S. track. In January 2025, Armenia and the United States adopted a Charter on Strategic Partnership – codifying cooperation across democracy, economy, and security assistance – an explicit diversification move (U.S. Embassy Yerevan, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, 2025).

Negotiation takeaways (Armenia). (1) Layered hedging – PfP/CEPA/ICC alongside a paused CSTO – seeks to restore bargaining parity with Russia after security disappointments (NATO, 2024; European Commission, 2021; EUR-Lex, 2018–; ICC, 2023; Reuters, 2024). (2) Exit threats are deployed to price Russia’s inaction higher while keeping procedural doors ajar for future re-engagement (Reuters, 2024; Górecki, 2024). (3) The diplomacy of law (CEPA, ICC) is a non-military hedge that can reshape expectations even under asymmetric power (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, 2017; ICC, 2023).

3.4.3. Kyrgyzstan’s Basing Politics: Monetizing Geography, Triangulating

Patrons

Kyrgyzstan’s most distinctive hedge is basing diplomacy – leveraging the U.S. Transit Center at Manas (2001–2014) and the Russian/CSTO Kant Air Base (2003–) to extract economic rents, security training, and political insurance, while maintaining PfP cooperation with NATO (Cooley, 2012; NATO, 2018; Pamment et al., 2019; U.S. Air Force, 2014).

The Transit Center at Manas served as a U.S. logistical hub for Afghanistan until June 2014, when it closed and operations shifted to Europe – an endpoint formally

documented by the U.S. Air Force (U.S. Air Forces Central, 2014; Thompson, 2014). The Kant base, by contrast, anchors Russia's/CSTO's airpower in the Kyrgyz theater and has been publicly celebrated by both sides, including at its 20th anniversary in 2023 (President of Russia, 2023). CSTO and Russian MoD materials frame Kant's tasks in regional air defense and support to CSTO forces during joint anti-terror operations – codifying a standing Russian security presence (CSTO, 2021; CSTO, 2020).

Through a decade, Bishkek alternately threatened closure, renegotiated terms, and rebranded “base” to “transit center,” monetizing access and signaling to Moscow and Washington that Kyrgyz consent was not cost-free (Cooley, 2012; Cooley, 2023). While press accounts detail rent increases, the authoritative official closure record suffices analytically: by ending the U.S. presence in 2014, Bishkek rebalanced toward Moscow while having previously harvested significant side-payments and training (U.S. Air Forces Central, 2014). This is auction diplomacy (Cooley): using market-like leverage in a security marketplace to improve fiscal and political terms (Cooley & Nexon, 2013; Cooley, 2012).

Kyrgyzstan sustains NATO PfP cooperation in training, civil emergency planning, and defense education (NATO, 2003; NATO, 2016; NATO, 2017; NATO, 2018). This cooperation is non-exclusive, making it tolerable to Moscow while still expanding Kyrgyz bureaucratic networks (NATO, 2025).

As ties with Türkiye deepened, Kyrgyzstan signaled procurement of Turkish UAVs (Bayraktar line), with top security officials and the president speaking publicly; state-aligned and defense outlets recorded these announcements (TRT World, 2021; Hürriyet Daily News/Anadolu Agency, 2021; Shephard, 2021). Regionally, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) offers an additional convening platform where Kyrgyzstan engages with Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan – institutionalizing cooperation in transport, emergency response, and connectivity (Organization of Turkic States, 2023a, 2023b; OTS Portal, n.d.). This Turkic lane is not a military alliance, but it creates redundant ties that diffuse reliance on a single patron (OTS, 2023).

Negotiation takeaways (Kyrgyzstan). (1) Basing is bargaining: Kyrgyzstan transforms geostrategic location into fungible leverage – alternating, sequencing, and re-pricing access (U.S. Air Forces Central, 2014; President of Russia, 2023). (2) Non-

exclusive cooperation (PfP) builds capabilities and relationships that raise the cost of exclusive Russian control without breaching CSTO obligations (NATO, 2017; NATO, 2018). (3) Turkic-security adjacency (OTS + defense industry ties) adds a light-touch hedge that is politically palatable and operationally useful (OTS , 2023; TRT World, 2021; Hürriyet Daily News/Anadolu Agency, 2021).

3.4.4. Tajikistan's Precarious Autonomy: Remittances, Borders, and Selective Security

Tajikistan hedges from a position of structural dependence – on Russian security (201st base), on remittances from labor migrants in Russia, and on external border-management assistance from the EU – while cautiously courting NATO training without alliance politics (Weitz, 2018; Cooley, 2012).

Russia's 201st Military Base in Tajikistan constitutes Moscow's largest out-of-area ground presence, undergirding border security vis-à-vis Afghanistan and providing a ready lever of influence (TASS, 2024; Weitz, 2018). Joint counter-terrorism drills recur and are reported by major agencies – again reinforcing the security patronage frame (Reuters, 2024).

Tajikistan's macro-vulnerability is remittance dependence; World Bank data show personal remittances routinely at very high shares of GDP, tying Dushanbe's socioeconomic stability to Russian labor markets (World Bank, 2025). Periodic Russian clampdowns on Central Asian migrants underscore this structural constraint on foreign-policy freedom (Reuters, 2024).

To reduce spillovers from Afghanistan and professionalize services, Tajikistan engages the EU-funded BOMCA program for integrated border management; official portals document equipment delivery, training, and institutional development (BOMCA, 2025). This is functional hedging: accept EU resources that do not contest CSTO prerogatives but raise state capacity at the border.

Tajikistan maintains PfP-type cooperation with NATO – training, counter-terrorism, civil emergency planning – under individualized programs updated biennially, as confirmed on NATO and Tajik MFA sites (NATO, 2019; Embassy of the

Republic of Tajikistan to the EU & NATO, 2021). This track creates skills and contacts while staying below alliance red lines (Weitz, 2018).

Negotiation takeaways (Tajikistan). (1) Security reliance (201st base) is balanced by capacity-building from the EU and training from NATO, producing complementary rather than confrontational external ties (BOMCA, 2025; NATO, 2024). (2) Economic dependence (remittances) narrows policy options, so hedging is low-visibility and technical, not declaratory (World Bank, 2025).

Across these cases, hedging is not an anti-Russian alignment; it is negotiated asymmetry – a repertoire of binding, buffering, and balancing tactics that recalibrate Russia’s leverage without triggering rupture (Cooley, 2012; Weitz, 2018). Three mechanisms recur:

1. **Instrumental layering.** States match the CSTO (hard-security backstop) with PfP/IPAP (skills, standards) and with legal-economic compacts (EU EPCA/CEPA) to lock in alternative pathways and lengthen decision time in crises (NATO, 2024; Council of the EU, 2020; EEAS, 2021).
2. **Proceduralization of Russian help.** Kazakhstan’s 2022 request/notification/withdrawal choreography shows how smaller members can shape Russian intervention into limited mandates, converting raw power into bounded service (CSTO, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Security Council Report, 2022).
3. **Exit-threats and legal hedges.** Armenia’s freeze of CSTO participation, ICC accession, and CEPA deepening illustrate how law and budgetary levers create bargaining chips short of abrogation (Reuters, 2024; AP, 2023; EEAS, 2021; ICC, 2023/2024).

These hedging behaviors shape the CSTO’s external face. Because members keep parallel channels to NATO, the EU, Turkey/OTS, the UN and the SCO, the CSTO appears internationally as one node in a polycentric network – neither fully insulated nor fully authoritative.

3.5. Conclusion

Chapter 3 asked why the CSTO—despite a mutual-defense clause, routinized exercises, and permanent organs—remains diplomatically peripheral and normatively isolated. The core answer emerging from §§3.2–3.4 is that the alliance’s negotiated hierarchy generates selective solidarity at home and limited credibility abroad. It performs best when protecting incumbents against externally framed, manageable risks; it performs poorly when asked to mediate intra-bloc disputes or to win bloc-to-bloc recognition from Western institutions that interpret the CSTO chiefly as an instrument of Russian regional primacy rather than a provider of broadly shared security goods (Cooley, 2012; Weitz, 2018).

Finding 1—Recognition politics. As §3.2 showed, the CSTO’s signature external project—recognition by NATO—has run aground on an enduring Allied equilibrium: deal bilaterally with Eurasian states and, where necessary, use the NATO–Russia Council; do not create a NATO–CSTO format that would legitimate a Russian-led bloc or constrain Allied flexibility (Weitz, 2018; NATO, 2024). This is not a tactical slight but a structural misfit between an alliance whose decision rules and capabilities embed Russian enablers and Western audiences that read those features as hierarchy, not parity (Weitz, 2018; CSTO, 2002). The result is insularity by design and reception: the CSTO speaks parity, but is heard as leverage multiplication (Weitz, 2018; CSTO, 2002).

Finding 2—Managed duality with the SCO. §3.3 traced a negotiated coexistence with the SCO: the SCO functions as the sovereignty-first, internal-security, agenda-setting forum, while the CSTO is Russia’s hard-security instrument. This arrangement limits overt Sino-Russian friction but narrows the CSTO’s functional range and public-goods profile; when China prefers SCO branding and when sovereignty rhetoric is paramount, the CSTO has little diplomatic space (Weitz, 2018). In short, the CSTO is too political for NATO and too specialized alongside the SCO (Weitz, 2018).

Finding 3—Member hedging and transactional autonomy. §3.4 showed how smaller members convert plural forums into leverage: Kazakhstan professionalizes with NATO (PFP/IPAP) and anchors EU ties while keeping the CSTO as crisis backstop;

Armenia has shifted toward legal hedges and exit-threats while cultivating tailored Western ties; Kyrgyzstan monetized basing politics; Tajikistan relies on Russian hard-security while Europeanizing border management. Procedurally, states juridify non-Russian ties and script Russian help (tight mandates, clear exits), turning asymmetry into transactional autonomy (Cooley, 2012; Weitz, 2018). The net effect is that the CSTO is one instrument among several, rarely the exclusive venue of members' security diplomacy (Cooley, 2012; Weitz, 2018).

These findings explain the chapter's paradox: formal strength, political fragility. Mutual defense (Art. 4), CRRF/peacekeeping frameworks, and habitual drills are meaningful, but credible activation hinges on the hegemon's calculus and on scenario narrowness. Where preferences converge (externalized threats, narcotics interdiction, disasters), the CSTO performs; where they divide (inter-member crises, recognition of territorial changes), it defaults to bilateral Russian management or recedes behind consensus formulas (CSTO, 2002; Weitz, 2018). This is not accidental failure but the predictable output of a negotiated hierarchy designed to preserve both Russian leadership and member sovereignty (CSTO, 2002; Weitz, 2018).

Implications for purpose. The chapter suggests a mission-minimalist path to relevance anchored in measurable deliverables: drug-interdiction campaigns, incident-management protocols, and legally tidy, time-bound deployments at member request—areas where the alliance has been most tolerable to outsiders and most defensible to domestic audiences (Weitz, 2018). Diplomatic energy spent on status projects (parity with NATO, sweeping political endorsements) reliably meets resistance and reinforces insularity (Weitz, 2018). A realistic agenda would: (i) double down on third-party umbrellas (UN-congruent peacekeeping support; OSCE-facilitated technical groups), (ii) codify guardrails so bloc procedures (e.g., foreign-basing consultations) do not become vetoes over lawful bilateral ties, and (iii) publish transparent performance metrics (interdiction outcomes; after-action reforms) to shift recognition debates from status to service provision (UNGA, 2021; OSCE, 2022; Weitz, 2018; CSTO, 2002/2010).

Limits and a usable niche. So long as force enablers, planning capacity, and financing remain overwhelmingly Russian, agenda control will gravitate to Moscow; so long as members value portfolio diplomacy, the CSTO will remain a non-exclusive

venue; and so long as NATO perceives unfavorable relative gains, bloc-to-bloc recognition is unlikely (Weitz, 2018). Within these constraints, the CSTO's comparative advantage is as a bounded crisis manager: a framework activated on request, under law, with limited aims, clear exits, and visible benefits to member publics (CSTO, 2002; Weitz, 2018). If the organization consistently translates hierarchy into serviceable public goods—rather than status claims—it will be hardest to dismiss and easiest for members to defend (Cooley, 2012; Weitz, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings: Answering the Research Questions

Research Question 1 – Institutional design and asymmetry. Across your chapters, the CSTO's procedures that appear egalitarian in form – consensus rules, format control, and club governance over basing/peacekeeping – operate as filters that preserve Russian primacy at low visible cost to partners. Formal equality of voice is maintained, but the real bargaining field is tilted through standards, training, logistics, and financing that run through Moscow. This design reliably converts “multilateral” settings into managed deference when distributional stakes are high (e.g., status, borders, regime security). This reading is consistent with scholarship that sees the CSTO's integration moving toward a traditional military-bloc repertoire without NATO-level depth or autonomy, and that emphasizes Russia's central role in setting the organization's floor and ceiling (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024).

Research Question 2 – Which lenses fit best? Neorealism explains the patron's push to stabilize the near abroad at minimal cost; asymmetrical-alliance theory clarifies how smaller members exchange loyalty signals for autonomy. But both lenses need supplementation in this region with two empirically visible variables: recognition markets (who is willing to treat CSTO decisions as authoritative) and political cost vetoes (who would pay reputational costs for action/inaction). These variables are repeatedly present in your cases and in recent assessments of the CSTO's limited recognition externally and uneven cohesion internally (Chaput, 2023).

Research Question 3 – How asymmetry manifests in crises. Your cases separate by threat framing, request formality, and intra-bloc distributional stakes. When a member government issues a clear, time-bounded request and frames the threat as externalized disorder, the CSTO can mount a short-horizon stabilization (Kazakhstan 2022). Where crises center on domestic legitimacy (Belarus 2020–) or touch sovereignty/status scripts between members (Nagorno-Karabakh 2020; Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan border escalations), activation becomes prohibitively costly or is off-loaded to bilateral/trilateral fixes – patterns mirrored in recent documentary analyses and contemporary reporting on the alliance's choices (Chaput, 2023).

Research Question 4 – External actors and system shocks. Bloc-to-bloc recognition is scarce; Western interaction has steered away from organization-to-organization formats, while proclaimed CSTO–SCO complementarity masks agenda-setting asymmetries. Since February 2022, bandwidth and reputational risks have tightened. The evidence shows **diverging behavior among members** (e.g., cancelled or boycotted exercises; Armenia’s disillusionment; Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan militarized incidents), while Belarus remains Moscow’s only consistently aligned partner, underscoring a trajectory in which the CSTO’s **cohesion costs** have risen even as its formal repertoire persists (Chaput, 2023).

Revisiting the Paradox: The CSTO as a Tool for Russian Influence with a Façade of Multilateralism

The findings support a hard-edged restatement of your core paradox. The CSTO is **not merely** a façade – its rapid reaction and peacekeeping formats are real and, in the right political conditions, usable. Yet the **primary function** documented across the cases and secondary literature is to sustain a **Russian-led security order** that manages access, constrains external penetration, and calibrates collective involvement to minimize reputational exposure for the patron. On balance, multilateralism often serves as a **presentation layer** for underlying bilateral leverage – exactly the pattern highlighted in recent “future of CSTO” appraisals and in the securitization-focused conclusion that situates the CSTO as an international subsystem whose integration has widened without attaining NATO-like collective reliability (Chaput, 2023; Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024).

The Impact of the Ukraine War: The CSTO at a Crossroads

The war in Ukraine has been a **stress test**. Three features stand out in the post-2022 record:

1. **Visible divergence among members.** Instances include cancelled joint drills (e.g., Kyrgyzstan’s cancellation of “Inviolable/Indestructible Brotherhood-2022”) and selective abstention/absence from exercises, signaling frayed cohesion under pressure from competing alignments and domestic constraints (Chaput, 2023).
2. **Reputational and bandwidth constraints for Russia.** Resource reallocation and sustained operational demands in Ukraine have constrained Moscow’s

ability to underwrite costly CSTO ventures, raising partners' incentives to hedge (Chaput, 2023).

3. **Hedging toward alternative security partners.** The documentation notes expanding bilateral defense cooperation between CSTO members and China (e.g., training, technology, peacekeeping cooperation) and signs of growing Chinese security presence in Central Asia – developments that enhance outside options and therefore dilute CSTO centrality (Chaput, 2023).

Pradhan & Kakoty's concluding chapter frames an actionable response from inside the organization's own logic: if the CSTO is to remain relevant, it must expand from ad hoc crisis response to institutionalized prevention/management – prioritizing political institution-building, conflict monitoring, early warning, sanctions/warning toolkits, and implementation/verification capacity, with the peacekeeping framework (“Agreement on Peacekeeping Actions and the State of Collective Peacekeeping Forces”) as a load-bearing instrument (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024).

Contribution to the Field of International Relations and Security Studies

Conceptual. Your thesis clarifies “collective security” in asymmetric regional clubs as a managed-fragility equilibrium – not automatic solidarity, but selective activation whose probability depends on threat framing, request formality, and reputational cost allocation. This complements neorealist and asymmetry lenses by adding recognition (external uptake of decisions) and political-cost vetoes (internal optics) as necessary variables. This reframing is strongly consonant with contemporary assessments of CSTO integration's limits and trajectory (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024; Chaput, 2023).

Empirical. The comparative reading of Kazakhstan 2022, Belarus 2020–, Nagorno-Karabakh 2020, and Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan border crises demonstrates that capacity absent political cover is inert, while procedure acts as power – a mapping that aligns with recent post-2022 divergence indicators reported in regional analyses (Chaput, 2023).

Methodological. By tying outcomes to codable triggers (framing, request, time-to-decision, mandate scope, exit clarity, venue displacement), your study converts a narrative puzzle into testable propositions, opening a path from small-N process tracing to medium-N coding.

Policy Implications and Avenues for Future Research

Near-term design fixes inside the CSTO (aligned with your sources).

- **Institutionalize prevention and verification.** Stand up a small, deploy-on-request conflict-monitoring and fact-finding capacity, paired with standardized liaison/hotlines and a sanctions/warning toolkit. This is precisely the shift urged by the securitization-based conclusion to move beyond episodic response toward continuous management (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024).
- **Make mandates tight by design.** Replicate the Kazakhstan 2022 template – short duration, narrow tasks, automatic draw-down – whenever activation is politically feasible. This reduces reputational drag and aligns with the only recent case of smooth collective action in your sample (Chaput, 2023).
- **Tackle “soft-security” drivers with technical modules.** Expand CSTO competence to water-energy interdependence and border management (where many escalations start), consistent with the recommendation to widen the security portfolio beyond kinetic responses (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024).

Strategic signaling. When the organization chooses not to act, issue formal reasons (legal threshold not met; sovereignty sensitivities; availability of alternative venues). Transforming non-activation into a traceable policy reduces ambiguity costs that currently erode credibility – an issue flagged in recent “future of CSTO” commentary (Chaput, 2023).

Future research (testable, data-driven). Build a coded dataset of CSTO crisis episodes with variables: (i) request type (formal/informal; time-bounded), (ii) framing (externalized/domestic), (iii) decision lag (days), (iv) deployment footprint/mandate, (v) exit clarity, (vi) displacement to other venues, (vii) member dissent signals (exercise cancellations/absences). This would allow validation of your propositions against the post-2022 divergence pattern noted in the documents (Chaput, 2023) and the institutionalization challenges highlighted in the book conclusion (Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024).

The CSTO is neither collapsing nor converging toward NATO-style reliability. It is an alliance whose formal repertoire persists while political cohesion has narrowed, particularly since 2022. Its comparative advantage remains bounded stabilization when framing and requests align; beyond that narrow lane, the organization tends to off-load

– a pattern consistent with the latest assessments of its integration limits and with prescriptions to shift toward prevention and verification if it wishes to remain relevant in a more competitive Eurasian security market (Chaput, 2023; Pradhan & Kakoty, 2024).

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