On November 28, 2019, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) summit was held in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, bringing together member states Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The event was attended by the leaders of CSTO countries, including Russian President Vladimir Putin.

CSTO presidency will be passed on to Russia in 2020, the main player in the organization, as Russia has the most powerful armed forces and is the most competent state when it comes to matters of security. In his speech, the Russian President outlined the main priority areas that Russia intends to work on during the country's presidency.

Moscow has drafted a five-year plan for military cooperation within the CSTO until 2025. Putin believes the CSTO countries should strengthen their peacekeeping activities, and their armed forces should take part in UN missions. In order to do so, the Russian President has recommended to begin having the appropriate documentation drafted.

Putin also said that Russia is in favor of the CSTO cooperating with non-member states, which can be granted observer status in the organization.

One of the main objectives for the CSTO is to combat international terrorism on member-state territory. To fight terrorism, CSTO countries carry out joint operations to identify and eliminate terrorist elements, as well as their
sources of financing. These types of operations will continue. Russia also intends to share the experience it gained fighting terrorism in Syria with its CSTO partners.

According to the Russian President, there is a risk that new "hot spots" may appear along the borders of CSTO member states, so there is a need to improve the effectiveness of analyzing and forecasting the military-political situation within the CSTO responsibility zone.

Vladimir Putin ended his speech to the CSTO leaders by once again inviting his colleagues to join Moscow in celebrating the “75th anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War”, on May 9, 2019.

During the summit, leaders of the CSTO countries adopted a joint statement in which they expressed their hope that the Treaty between the Russian Federation and the United States of America on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms would be extended. The future of this Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) has been doubtful since February 2019, when the United States began criticizing it, and in August they pulled out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

Despite the deterioration of relations with the West, Russia and the CSTO have not lost hope of being able to establish a constructive dialogue with these countries, which is necessary for them to be able to join together to fight global threats, such as international terrorism. It should not be forgotten that when the foreign ministers of the CSTO countries met in Bishkek in May 2019, they appealed to NATO to establish direct contacts between the two military blocs and to put a system in place that would facilitate regular consultation on the most important issues.

Now more than ever, given the confrontation with the West and the growing threat of terrorism, the CSTO states need to remain united and increase cooperation on all strategic issues. Even Russia, with all of its military might, still needs reliable partners in the post-Soviet world, and Russia's support is indispensable for other members of the CSTO.

As President Putin announced at the summit, the CSTO is considering greater cooperation with non-member countries, as well as inviting new CSTO observers and partners.

The most obvious partners who could help protect the southern borders of the CSTO would be Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which also border Afghanistan like CSTO member state Tajikistan. The CSTO focuses much of its attention on the zone where Tajikistan borders with Afghanistan.

Afghanistan has been engulfed in civil war for decades, the country is partly controlled by illegal armed groups, and it is a source of terrorist threat and illicit drugs exported all over the world, but primarily to its neighbors in Central Asia. Central Asian security has a direct impact on Russia's security and that of other CSTO countries. Strengthening the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border is therefore a matter of particular concern for the governments of these countries.

Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are also under constant threat of attack from Afghan terrorists, and they have been feeling a particularly strong threat in recent years.

In June 2018, there was an attack on Turkmenistan’s border crossing near Tagtabazar. Eight Turkmen border guards were killed in the skirmish. In January 2019, terrorist attacks were carried out in Hairatan, an Afghan city close to the border with Uzbekistan. In March 2019, terrorists seized part of Afghanistan's Badghis Province, which borders Turkmenistan. Refugees from the Badghis Province crossed over the border and came into Turkmenistan. In early November 2019, militants from the illegal terrorist organization ISIL attacked the Ishkobod border post on the Tajikistan-Uzbekistan border. A Tajik border guard and policeman were killed.

Given the situation, Uzbekistan (which had been a member of the CSTO back in the day, but later suspended its membership) and Turkmenistan would do well to consider increasing cooperation with the CSTO for joint border protection.

New members who may potentially join the CSTO in the future include Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Transcaucasia, partially recognized independent states supported by Russia. The only UN member states that recognize them are Russia, Venezuela, Nauru, Nicaragua and Syria (Tuvalu has also recognized South Ossetia). Admitting Abkhazia and South Ossetia to the CSTO may therefore be perceived as a serious act of provocation by the part of the international community aligned with the West. However, if this were to happen, the CSTO might gain a considerable advantage: both countries have Russian military bases – 4th Military Base in South Ossetia for ground forces and the joint 7th Military Base in Abkhazia. These bases host about 4,000 Russian military personnel each. If the partially recognized republics were to be allowed to join the CSTO, the personnel stationed at these bases would be integrated into the
CSTO general security system. This could improve coordination between the Russian military and their allies in different parts of the former Soviet Union and increase the overall military capabilities of the CSTO.

Increasing membership and interaction with non-member states is not the only work the CSTO has to do in order to strengthen regional security. Projects to create a joint air defense and missile defense system for the CSTO, the possibility of a Russian military base in Belarus and other options are still being discussed.

Overall, it is safe to say that next year will be a productive one for the CSTO under the presidency of the Russian Federation.

*Dmitry Bokarev, political observer, exclusively for the online magazine "New Eastern Outlook".*