CSTO: Results of a Difficult Year and Upcoming Tasks

The year 2020 proved to be a challenging time for all countries of the world. The COVID-19 pandemic led to border closures, reduced production and trade, and the resulting global economic crisis. Amidst all this, political and even military crises have befallen a number of states. This article will discuss how the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which includes Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, has survived the 2020 test.

A session of the CSTO Collective Security Council was held on December 2, 2020. Due to the pandemic situation, the event was held remotely, in the form of a video conference. Russian President Vladimir Putin chaired the meeting. The Russian leader summarized the results of the CSTO’s activities over the past year. The main problems for the CSTO countries in this difficult year were the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, unrest in Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, difficult relations with the West and the COVID-19 pandemic. Putin spoke about the support that the CSTO states gave to each other during all these trials.

Speaking of the Karabakh conflict of September-November 2020, President Putin recalled the role of Russia as mediator in its resolution. The deployment of Russian peacekeepers on the line of contact and along the Lachin corridor connecting Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia was also of great importance.

As for the events in Belarus, the Russian leader emphasized the negative role played in them by the West, which unleashed a media campaign against the current government of the country and exerted sanction pressure on it.

Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, Vladimir Putin recalled the deliveries of medical equipment, test systems, and protective equipment that Russia made to its CSTO partners throughout the year, as well as the Russian medics who worked in these countries.
Speaking about the situation in Kyrgyzstan, the Russian president commended the stabilization of the country, which experienced popular unrest and the resignation of the president in October 2020, and the fact that, despite the change of government, Kyrgyzstan has not changed its attitude toward the CSTO and the EAEU.

Speaking about the most important tasks ahead, the Russian leader stated the need for CSTO countries to jointly help people affected by the Karabakh conflict and the need to develop medical and pharmacological cooperation among the Organization’s states in order to overcome the COVID-19 epidemic as soon as possible. One of the most important issues is the start of deliveries of Russian antiviral vaccines to all CSTO countries, as well as their joint production.

More than three months have passed since the December session. At the end of December, production of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V began in Kazakhstan. Kyrgyzstan elected a new president, Sadyr Zhaparov, in January 2021. There is less and less media coverage of the protests in Belarus, and by mid-March 2021, more than 52,700 refugees had already returned to Nagorno-Karabakh. It can be concluded that the situation is stabilizing with regard to the problems raised at the December session of the CSTO Collective Security Council.

As in all previous years, defense cooperation to maintain regional security remains an equally important task of the CSTO. For all the new hardships that the year 2020 has brought, there are still many old problems. For example, the situation in Afghanistan, a country that borders on the CSTO and where terrorist groups have been at war for decades. Across Afghanistan’s border with Tajikistan, which is also Afghanistan’s border with the CSTO, there is a constant possibility of illegal armed groups breaking through or drug caravans passing through.

It should be noted that the situation in Afghanistan in 2020 also showed a tendency to complication.

In February 2020, after lengthy negotiations, a peace agreement was signed between the US, which has occupied Afghanistan since 2001, and the Taliban (banned in Russia). In accordance with the agreement, America began withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan in 2020, and the Taliban, the country’s most powerful terrorist organization, which for decades was considered the enemy of all progressive humanity, was given the status of a legal political force with the right to participate in Afghan elections. In March 2020, the US began withdrawing troops. Throughout the remainder of the year, the US military continued to leave Afghanistan and the country’s legitimate government released Taliban prisoners from prisons. The Taliban, despite their new legal status, continued their acts of violence in which hundreds of Afghan civilians were killed.

US President Donald Trump’s decision to repatriate American soldiers who have been dying in Afghanistan over the past 20 years can be understood from a human point of view, so it has not caused much criticism from the CSTO countries. However, from a geopolitical point of view, it may lead to rather unpleasant consequences. There is speculation that the Taliban do not intend to abandon their methods and ideology, and after the US soldiers finally leave Afghanistan, will try to seize power in the country by force. In that case, the legitimate government of Afghanistan, which was already barely hanging on as long as the Americans were fighting on its side, is unlikely to be able to stand up to the Taliban with the remaining troops of US NATO allies in the country. If the seizure of power happens, Afghanistan and the entire region can expect a veritable rampage of terrorism. Accordingly, the situation on the Tajik-Afghan border may worsen.

How events in Afghanistan will unfold will become clear soon: The US has pledged to withdraw its troops by May 2021. In the event of a negative scenario, the CSTO would face a multiplication of the terrorist threat. Recognizing this, throughout 2020 the CSTO countries continued to conduct joint military exercises despite the threat of COVID-19 (of course, while taking all possible precautions). The most notable of these exercises was “Unbreakable Brotherhood,” held in October 2020 in Belarus.

For 2021, the CSTO also has extensive plans for military exercises, anti-epidemic actions and other types of cooperation. No matter what happens in neighboring countries, the joint work and mutual assistance of the six states is the guarantor of their security.

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