

War for Peace

How Moscow Expands Its Clout Under the Guise of “Peacekeeping Operations”

by [Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](/experts/anna-borshchevskaya)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](/experts/anna-borshchevskaya)

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East.



Articles & Testimony

The Russian troop deployment to Kazakhstan demonstrates how the Kremlin's principles depart from those of its Western rivals.

This month marked the first time that the [Collective Security Treaty Organization \(CSTO\) \(https://en.odkb-csto.org/\)](https://en.odkb-csto.org/), a Russia-led military alliance, deployed peacekeepers anywhere in the thirty-year history of the organization. Specifically, Russian and Russia-led troops went into Kazakhstan after the country's president, Kassym-Joart Tokayev, announced on January 5 that he had requested assistance from the CSTO. The current CSTO chair, Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan, [reported \(https://en.odkb-csto.org/news/news_odkb/zayavlenie-predsedatelya-soveta-kollektivnoy-bezopasnosti-odkb-premera-respubliki-armeniya-n/%23loaded\)](https://en.odkb-csto.org/news/news_odkb/zayavlenie-predsedatelya-soveta-kollektivnoy-bezopasnosti-odkb-premera-respubliki-armeniya-n/%23loaded) that “peacekeepers” would briefly deploy to Kazakhstan upon Tokayev's request due to the “threat to national security and sovereignty” of Kazakhstan, “caused, among other things, by aggression from outside.” According to the [Russian Ministry of Defense \(https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12402289@egNews\)](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12402289@egNews), the main tasks of the peacekeeping forces were “protection of important state and military facilities and assisting the law enforcement” in stabilizing the situation in Kazakhstan. Approximately 2,500 troops arrived in Kazakhstan several days after.

What happened in Kazakhstan? And what exactly were Russian peacekeepers doing? To be sure, much remains unknown. Still, current and previous experience shows that despite superficial similarities, Russian-led peacekeeping activities suggest divergent views on security, human rights, and approach to international affairs as compared to Western counterparts.

Principles of Peacekeeping

It is striking that the current CSTO deployment to Kazakhstan began without public deliberations beforehand. It also appeared as either a unilateral or bilateral action. But **peacekeeping operations** (<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/forming-new-operation>) are generally multilateral activities that follow specific principles that stem from Chapters VI and VII of the UN Charter, in cases of interstate or intrastate conflicts. Previous NATO peacekeeping efforts in Afghanistan, for example, were UN-mandated, and initially worked through the multinational International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Earlier, Bosnia's peacekeeping mission in the mid-1990s had a **UN a mandate through the Dayton Accords** (<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/past/unmibh/background.html>). Indeed, **NATO stated** (<https://www.nato.int/docu/handbook/2006/hb-en-2006/Part4.pdf>) in December 1992 “that it was also ready to support peacekeeping operations under the authority of the UN Security Council.” Once peacekeepers are deployed, their missions generally should follow three key principles: “**consent of the parties, impartiality, non-use of force except in self-defense and defense of the mandate** (<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/principles-of-peacekeeping>) .” To be sure, each case is unique, and entails many caveats. In the past, complete neutrality was at times impossible, for example in **Lebanon in 1983** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/international-stabilization-force-lebanon-problems-and-prospects>); unique national situations also limit what countries' peacekeeping forces can do. There is no one-size-fits-all. Still, these principles lay out general guidance; but what is more, Moscow, in practice, simply follows a different framework.

One-Sided Support and Frozen Conflicts

The very word “peacekeeper” in Russian carries a slightly different meaning; it is *mirotvorets*—literally “peacemaker” but used interchangeably with “peacekeeper.” But more to the point, Russian peacekeepers historically do not act as neutral arbiters. Rather they support one side, something that those who have observed these missions in practice discuss in private. From a Russian state perspective, supporting one side creates stability—it allows ownership of two thirds of the struggle. One-sided support has been the practice in previous Russian peacekeeping efforts, for example in Moldova, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Foreign Military Studies Office **wrote** (<https://www.bits.de/NRANEU/docs/finch96.htm>) in July 1996 about Russian involvement Tajikistan's civil war: “Although the Russians have labeled their involvement as a PKO [peace keeping operation], the Russian military has been anything but impartial.” One can legitimately disagree about the utility—or even the possibility—of being neutral depending on a particular case, but that is a separate issue.

What matters is that Moscow's approach simply freezes the conflict and maintains control. Moreover, it will not shy away from acting unilaterally if it has to, as it attempted, for example, in Kosovo in 1999, where it was already part of a legitimate joint mission together with NATO to begin with. The Russian state views these situations from a very cynical and pragmatic vantage point; it finds Western ideas of involvement for purely altruistic reasons naïve at best, destabilizing at worst. Moscow may end large-scale fighting and assert control, but a frozen conflict does not offer a vision for a better alternative.

The fact of the matter is, the CSTO's current Russia-led mission in Kazakhstan supported Tokayev; it provided a security blanket for his regime. To be sure, if Tokayev presented clear evidence of his country coming under dire external attack, it may have been reasonable for a regional military alliance to act quickly in such a case. But Tokayev presented no such public evidence and instead brutalized his own people. True, Kazakhstan's protests, initially peaceful, soon took on a serious violent component. But at its core, the initial protest had legitimate grievances; moreover, a number of protestors put forth peaceful demands. Rather than engage in dialogue with this group, Tokayev gave his troops an order to “**shoot to kill without warning**

[\(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/07/kazakhstan-russia-protests-csto/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/07/kazakhstan-russia-protests-csto/).” Another question that arises then is, where was the UN in all this?

Counterterrorism and Other Operations

What Russian authorities call “peacekeeping” in reality often includes counterterrorism and other components. Western military observers who studied Russian peacekeeping in depth often point this out in private. A former American military officer who served with the Russian military during their peacekeeping mission in Bosnia and also as an observer to Russian peacekeeping in Transnistria, South Ossetia and Tajikistan explained, “[Russians] have a muscular approach, it looks like a counterterrorism operation [to create] population control...because that’s what they feel is the role of the soldier.” The West meanwhile, as he said, follows strict rules of engagement with “lots of oversight by other organizations. We are subject to that transparency.” In other words, Western power in peacekeeping missions comes from the strength of the coalition and legality of a mandate, but for Russia it is about raw military power no one wants to mess with. This is not to suggest that past NATO-led missions did not have problems, but those problems were of a different nature.

To give a more recent example of other elements encroaching on Russia’s “peacekeeping,” in late 2020 in Nagorno-Karabakh, analyst Vladimir Socor [observed \(https://jamestown.org/program/russian-peacekeeping-in-karabakh-old-model-new-features-mission-creep-part-two/?cfchlftk=qbos3rIBfc2toFRkNBvw0e2OHnXxSy9ZHZVcnksmEBU-1642385264-0-gaNycGzNCL0\)](https://jamestown.org/program/russian-peacekeeping-in-karabakh-old-model-new-features-mission-creep-part-two/?cfchlftk=qbos3rIBfc2toFRkNBvw0e2OHnXxSy9ZHZVcnksmEBU-1642385264-0-gaNycGzNCL0), “For the first time in the history of Russia’s ‘peacekeeping’ missions, its military personnel has taken charge of civil affairs in this theater of operation.” Russia may not be the only country prone to mission creep, but again Moscow simply has a much more cynical approach to this issue and has far less qualms about acting unilaterally.

Political Component

It is possible that the unrest in Kazakhstan involved internal power struggles and that Tokayev could not control the situation alone—although even this point remains unclear. Kazakhstan’s leadership had, [by expert accounts \(https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/01/what-make-kazakhstans-seemingly-sudden-unrest?fbclid=IwAR0E1z9CqZNhMvuBW_ITtGiYSdkvvtvNaP-bkNEYXU_TNmaIgUqSobr8bs\)](https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/01/what-make-kazakhstans-seemingly-sudden-unrest?fbclid=IwAR0E1z9CqZNhMvuBW_ITtGiYSdkvvtvNaP-bkNEYXU_TNmaIgUqSobr8bs), long since quashed genuine democratic opposition to its rule, but the ineptitude and corruption of his authoritarian regime led to problems that festered and had no place for expression other than on the street. Moscow, for its part, could have had many reasons for getting involved. The situation probably took the Kremlin by surprise as much as it did anyone else, maybe even distracting it from bigger Ukraine-related issues, but it also provided an opportunity to assert greater control in the post-Soviet space, especially in a country close to Afghanistan and where China especially has been asserting economic control. Providing assistance through the CSTO, especially in the current international climate, gave Moscow a veneer of multilateral legitimacy rather than going it alone. Whatever the reasons, the result is that Tokayev now owes his political survival to Putin, as Moscow tends to dominate all regional security and economic organizations; no one seriously expects Armenia, of all countries, to act independently of Moscow.

Indeed, past experience shows that the CSTO is guided more by pragmatism than humanitarianism.

During [interethnic violence \(https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/lessons-kyrgyzstans-2010-clashes-a-decade-on/\)](https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/lessons-kyrgyzstans-2010-clashes-a-decade-on/) in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, the CSTO did not engage; its charter at the time did not allow for an intervention in such a case, and while the organization [amended the charter \(https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-monographs/204275?pi296680=3\)](https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-monographs/204275?pi296680=3) later that year after the incident, in more recent examples in Nagorno-Karabakh beginning in 2020, Putin clung to a technicality to delay getting involved on the side of Armenia, a fellow CSTO member, on the grounds that the territory where the fighting took place at the time—in and around Nagorno-Karabakh—was excluded from the mutual defense agreement; instead he first allowed Azerbaijan to conquer some territories, in what appeared to be an effort to [improve \(https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-](https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-)

[g2/fmso/m/fmso-monographs/204275?pi296680=3](https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-monographs/204275?pi296680=3) Russia's geostrategic position in the conflict.

Meanwhile, Moscow continues to perceive Western-led peacekeeping operations as a tool of global American imperialism that Moscow actively opposes, as Putin considers the U.S.-led rules-based global order a hypocrisy. The Russian embassy [tweeted \(https://mobile.twitter.com/RusEmbUSA/status/1480722741573697544\)](https://mobile.twitter.com/RusEmbUSA/status/1480722741573697544) after the CSTO deployment to Kazakhstan, “Unlike the [American] troops, occupying territories of [Syria] and [Kosovo], the @CSTO_ODKB carry out the mission to ensure security of the critical infrastructure in Kazakhstan upon the request of its authorities.”

Certainly, Russia is not alone in being guided by realpolitik; still, however flawed or even outright failed previous UN or NATO-led peacekeeping efforts may have been—a conversation beyond the scope of this article—they aimed to adhere to the above-mentioned principles. Putin is committed to eroding them.

Future Missions?

The fact of the matter is, the Russian military is well prepared for conducting similar future operations. The Russian military has executed precisely the type of operation it has been exercising for years, called “[Unbreakable Brotherhood \(https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-monographs/360801\)](https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-monographs/360801),” which included for instance a live-fire portion—they prepare for having a fight, something Western peacekeepers again generally would not do.

Press reports suggest that, at least for now, Russian-led troops are indeed leaving this time. China retains a lot of economic control in Kazakhstan and perhaps for this reason Tokayev appears to have more independence from Moscow than other post-Soviet countries that would have had a harder time telling Moscow the mission is over.

But ultimately, the departure of troops is not necessarily the main issue. With the current mission in Kazakhstan, Moscow demonstrated it has both the competence and confidence to carry out such operations, at a time when it is using all elements of state power to threaten the West into a dialogue on its terms to renegotiate the entire post-Cold War world order. Many Western analysts may still think of the Russian military as weak, but it has come a long way since the 1990s, while forces the Kremlin deployed to Kazakhstan included the 45th Guards Spetsnaz Brigade, a seasoned elite group with experience in Ukraine, Chechnya and Abkhazia. There is no reason to be surprised if Moscow, whether through the CSTO or not, deploys another “peacekeeping” force to make a point. It is only a matter of time.

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East. ❖

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