

## **Central Asia: Joined-Up Security**

**Author:** [Leila Saralaeva](#)

Large-scale military exercise in the Kyrgyz mountains sparks calls for preventive as well as reactive responses to insurgent threat.

Central Asian states should be trying to prevent incursions by extremists as well as training to deal with them when they happen, analysts say.

Calls for a more focused response to the threat of insurgency were heard after former Soviet states within the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, CSTO, held a large-scale military exercise on August 2-6.

Troops of the Collective Rapid Reaction Force from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Russia carried out a simulated operation to root out an attack by militant guerrillas in the Kyrgyz mountains.

The exercise, codenamed Frontier 2004, involved more than 2,000 soldiers from Russia and the three Central Asian members. Initial planning was done in Kazakhstan, while the operation itself took place at the Kyrgyz defence ministry's Edelweiss mountain-warfare training centre, 12 kilometres from the town of Balykchi on the shores of Lake Issykul.

The massed troops deployed overwhelming force, with an arsenal including armour, artillery, ground-attack planes and helicopter gunships, to repel a notional attack by 120 "rebels" who had entered Kyrgyz territory and were attempting to capture a village. Explosions rocked the mountains for more than 40 minutes as artillery and aircraft pounded the area.

The scenario was clearly modelled on raids by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, IMU, into southern Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 1999-2000, which highlighted the unpreparedness of individual armies and the lack of coordination between them.

The CSTO is a regional grouping intended to provide collective security and coordinate efforts to combat threats from drugs barons, human traffickers, religious extremists and gun-runners. It was set up two years ago by Russia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus and Armenia, on the basis of the Collective Security Treaty, a pact signed in 1992 by members of the Commonwealth of Independent States, CIS.

The Rapid Reaction Force established in 2001 is the operational arm of joint counter-insurgency efforts, while the CIS Anti-Terrorist Centre based in Moscow is referred to as the "brain" of such operations.

Uzbekistan signed the 1992 treaty but withdrew from it in 1999, apparently uncomfortable with the level of Russia's influence and mistrustful of the grouping's effectiveness. It did not contribute any troops or equipment to the exercise, choosing only to send observers.

The other Central Asian state, Turkmenistan, has always remained aloof from CIS structures and is not a CSTO member.

While the exercise was deemed a success, many analysts voiced concern that the approach was no longer appropriate, since the regional and international security situation has already changed.

“Terrorism is taking on new forms, which require new strategies to combat it,” Kyrgyz security analyst Orozbek Moldaliev told IWPR.

In Moldaliev’s view, this kind of exercise is unlikely to prepare the region’s armed forces for the more frequent small-scale attacks – such as those carried out in Tashkent last month, where three suicide bombers targeted the United States and Israeli embassies and the Uzbek prosecutor’s office.

Other analysts suggest that the CSTO needs to place more emphasis on prevention rather than reaction.

Kyrgyz parliamentary deputy Alisher Abdimomunov, a former Soviet KGB colonel, said security forces should not concentrate solely on the threat posed by large groups. “We need to consider the threat from lone terrorists, and analyse and gather information at the stage at which they first emerge, not when they attack,” he told IWPR.

However, in order to do so, intelligence-gathering will have to be brought up to date. Kyrgyz army general Ismail Isakov, who serves as a parliamentary deputy, said the intelligence services need greater numbers of highly-trained officers.

The Independent Military Review, the defence supplement of Russia’s Nezavisimaya Gazeta newspaper, published a special report on the Frontier 2004 operation arguing that while large-scale exercises are useful, a more subtle approach involving intelligence and preventive measures will be needed if security is to be effective.

The August 6 report, written by military journalist Vladimir Mukhin, suggested that planes, helicopters and large numbers of special forces of the kind deployed in the exercise will only be useful in cases where there is an militant base that has to be destroyed. In the main, it may prove more effective long term to infiltrate extremist groups, and to strengthen borders to cut down on the number of people currently sneaking across them. However, the report notes that such tactics are only now being discussed by the CSTO states.

Almaty-based analyst Fabrizio Veliamini pointed out that the poverty-stricken state of some of the armed forces that make up the CSTO is a powerful argument for pooling efforts to counter potential threats.

The poor levels of training, equipment and nutrition in the Kyrgyz army were all too apparent in 1999 and 2000, when its troops struggled to deal with IMU guerrilla attacks in the southern Batken region. Veliamini believes not enough has changed since then to inspire confidence that a similar incursion could be warded off successfully.

“At the moment, none of the [individual] countries would be able to defend itself [if] faced with a real threat,” he said. “I doubt that the Central Asian armies would be able to deter such a terrorist threat without the help of the Russian army.”

Alexander Kim, a colonel in the Kyrgyz army and a journalist writing on military affairs, also voices doubts about his country’s military capacity to react to another threat, and called for a greater commitment to cooperation at the highest level.

But he warned, “The mechanism of cooperation within the CSTO is not that simple. Political as well as military decisions will have to be made.”

Leila Saralaeva is a independent journalist in Bishkek.

**Location:** Central Asia  
Uzbekistan  
Turkmenistan  
Tajikistan

**Focus:** Central Asia

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/central-asia-joined-security>