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SOVEREIGNTY AND ALLIANCE PURPOSE IN REGIONAL INTERNATIONAL
SOCIETY: THE CASE OF THE CSTO IN EURASIA

MA Thesis

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Abstract

The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) presents a persistent puzzle in international relations scholarship: despite two decades of existence and largely stable membership, the alliance deployed military forces to a member state only once, in Kazakhstan in January 2022, while remaining inactive in the face of numerous other conflicts involving member states. Existing scholarship typically frames the CSTO as either an instrument of Russian influence or as a functionally irrelevant “paper alliance.” This thesis argues that neither interpretation adequately accounts for the continued investment member states make in the organization, nor seeks to identify internal logic guiding its selective activation.

Drawing on English School (ES) theory, this thesis examines how Eurasian regional international society has developed a differentiated conception of sovereignty as a primary institution, and how this regional understanding shapes the perceived purpose of the CSTO as a secondary institution. Using framing analysis applied for a corpus of Russian-language documents from the CSTO’s website, this study traces discourse across five instances of member-state challenges to sovereignty between 2010 and 2024.

The analysis reveals that the CSTO operates according to a two-threshold legitimacy structure that reflects a regionally elevated conception of Westphalian sovereignty. Simultaneously, the alliance exhibits a comparatively permissive attitude toward pooling domestic political and legal resources, reflecting lower emphasis on domestic sovereignty consistent with its members’ authoritarian regime type. The CSTO’s consistent framing of threats in non-state actor terms further delimits where the alliance is considered an appropriate instrument of security provision. Rather than evidence of dysfunction, these patterns reveal a coherent regional security logic with implications for how scholars understand alliance behavior in non-Western contexts.

Keywords: CSTO, English School, sovereignty, alliance dynamics, framing analysis, regional international society.

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List of Abbreviations

BRICS	International organization which originally consisted of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, now with additional members.
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CRRF	Collective Rapid Reaction Forces (of the CSTO)
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
ES	English School
FSB	Federal Security Service, Russia's main security and intelligence agency
IO	International organization
IR	International relations
MID	Military interstate dispute
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NKAO	Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast
RO	Regional organization
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
UN	United Nations
WHO	World Health Organization

Introduction

On January 6, 2022, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) announced it would do something it had never done before in its 20-year history: deploy troops to a member state. This reaction to domestic turmoil in Kazakhstan appeared to be an aberration, as the CSTO had not responded to other instances of conflict, domestic or otherwise, involving member states in the past. The two-week deployment of about 2,500 Russian-led peacekeepers ended without having taken part in any of the violence rocking the country; that was left to Kazakhstani law enforcement. This incident did little to change Western analysts' reading of the CSTO as a "paper alliance" (Scott & Askerov, 2024, p. 98) whose value exists primarily as a tool for Moscow's Eurasian integration ambitions. However, the CSTO's membership has largely remained steady with the exception of Uzbekistan leaving, re-joining, and leaving again for good in 2012, and Armenia indicating in 2024 its intent to exit the alliance but failing to take the legal steps necessary to sever ties. The remaining member states – Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan – continue to spend money, energy, and resources on the CSTO as they have since its inception in 2002.

Scholarly discourse struggles to construct a coherent narrative about the alliance, tending to either acknowledge it as an important institutional structure used by Russia to manage post-Soviet states or as an irrelevant shell incapable of action. On the one hand, the CSTO is described as a "tool of Russian influence" (Peyrouse, 2019, p. 907) to exert power among post-Soviet states (see also Lo, 2015). Indeed, from Russia's perspective, a security alliance is a logical regional integration tool to utilize in balancing against both the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in the east and NATO in the west. Frost (2009) described the CSTO as a key mechanism in Russia's Central Asia strategy, focused on ensuring pro-Moscow political structures and limiting US and Chinese influence (p. 85). By monopolizing arms sales to member states, Russia guarantees that they do not diversify weapon stocks (Peyrouse, 2019, p. 905) and by training CSTO forces in Russia with Russian weapons, Russia structurally incubates a Russia-aligned military orientation in member states (Frost, 2009, p. 87). From this perspective, the CSTO operates as Russia's attempt "at securing strategic certainty across exclusive space" (Kerr, 2009, p. 80) and "is an effective tool for military and political integration" (Frost, 2009, p. 92). In this sense, the CSTO is frequently listed as an institution worthy of discussion and

consideration when examining Russia's regional governance projects, alongside entities such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Eurasian Economic Association (EAEU) (see Lo, 2015; Gvosdev & Marsh, 2014; Fridrichová & Kříř, 2024).

On the other hand, scholars are also quick to point out the weakness and failures of the CSTO, arguing that the alliance has failed to address threats and conflict in member states (Scott & Askerov, 2024). For Baev (2014), the proof of the CSTO's weakness lies in the failure of the organization to attract engagement with the SCO and NATO, the fact that Russia continues to engage in bilateral deals with Belarus and Armenia rather than multilaterally through the CSTO, and its inability to agree on threats and security issues due to the geographical heterogeneity of member states. Lack of reaction to conflict in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 or border conflicts between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 2016 "discredit the capacities ... of Russian involvement in the region" (Peyrouse, 2019, p. 907). Furthermore, the CSTO's unwillingness to recognize Russia's de facto annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 (Baev, 2014) or Crimea in 2014 (Kharitonova, 2024) suggests serious policy disagreements that raise questions about the political unity of CSTO member states. Peyrouse (2019), Baev (2014), and Scott and Askerov (2024) all argue that the CSTO helps authoritarian regimes stay in power, which helps explain why the alliance responded to the unrest in Kazakhstan. However, this point fails to address why the alliance was not activated in response to mass protests in Belarus in 2020, or even in Russia in 2011-2013. Such disunity and failure to act has led scholars to call the CSTO more interested in "fictive" (Peyrouse, 2019, p. 907) threats rather than addressing actual regional challenges, while Baev (2014) argues that "Russia has never seriously invested" (p. 41) in collective security mechanisms through the CSTO.

Both perspectives – acknowledging the CSTO as a Russian tool of influence worthy of discussion and discrediting it due to failure to act in meaningful ways – reveal the shortcomings of existing scholarly discourse to explain why the CSTO continues to exist. If the alliance's purpose lies in being a Russian tool to spread influence and hamper other member states' ability to diversify foreign or security policy, this does not explain why states like Kazakhstan have not exited the alliance to pursue greater policy freedom, particularly since Uzbekistan's case set a precedent (or, further, why Armenia has not triggered the legal protocols to actually abolish its membership). Focusing on the utility Russia receives from membership fails to acknowledge the

agency of other member states in deciding to pay member dues and contribute staff, time by their head of state, and resources to the multiple military exercises hosted each year via the CSTO. However, perspectives describing the CSTO as a failed security alliance do not explain why Russia permitted such passivity, especially when there was much at stake in terms of international observance of Russia's decisions, both from the east and west (China/SCO and NATO). It was hardly due to lack of opportunity; every member state has, at some point since the conception of the alliance, faced conflict, ranging from military threats from non-member neighbors to border skirmishes and mass anti-government protests. Russia possesses outsized military capabilities vis-a-vis other member states and has demonstrated few qualms about intervening in post-Soviet states. The lack of response to conflicts suggests a non-military reason for lack of intervention and does not explain what about the situation in Kazakhstan in 2022 differed from other opportunities for the CSTO to activate. Yet neither the scholars acknowledging the CSTO as an institution of at least partial relevance for Russia or those declaring its irrelevance can explain why the alliance's members (both Russia and others) behave as though the CSTO possesses a purpose worth their time and participation when it has activated only once.

The contrast between how scholars evaluate the CSTO and the alliance's behavior suggests that there is an as-of-yet unexplained logic dictating where member states situate the purpose of the alliance. In thinking about why states choose to ally, existing research theorizes various reasons: to deter against greater powers (Waltz, 1979) or against threats (Walt, 1985), to reduce the likelihood of militarized conflict (Siverson & Tennefoss, 1984), or to control the foreign policy of a lesser power (Morrow, 1991; Weitsman, 2004). Yet the CSTO appears to have had little impact on whether members engage in militarized conflict or operate as effective deterrence against threats. Nor has membership resulted in Russia convincing other members to support its policies towards Crimea or Abkhazia. Universal theories about why states choose to ally appear to poorly explain the reasons CSTO members remain dedicated to the organization after decades of limited alliance activity.

Accepting Waltz's (1979) assumption that a state's primary goal is to survive, the choice to ally is closely tied to the protection of sovereignty. An attack challenges the main "benefit" of sovereignty, non-intervention, while also threatening the state's ability to control its border and,

in some cases, its control over the domestic population. However, joining an alliance also requires a state to give up some amount of its sovereignty (Morrow, 1993), meaning that states calculate whether an alliance is worth the autonomy costs (Morrow, 1991). However, sovereignty is not a norm universally defined and agreed upon (Jackson, 1999), despite its central role in contemporary international relations; its meaning can change across time periods, and different types of sovereignty have been theorized (Krasner, 2009). Considering the underlying role sovereignty plays in determining why states coalesce into security alliances, yet also the norm's fluidity as a constructed norm, this relationship suggests that understanding how exactly sovereignty is conceptualized plays a key role in grasping the role a given security alliance plays in providing protection.

One school of thought in international relations (IR) particularly engaged in examining how norms construct the “social context” (Costa-Buranelli, 2021, p. 11) of global politics is English School (ES) theory. ES has developed a framework for examining the interplay between a norm like sovereignty and institutions like alliances, particularly in regional formats. Sovereignty as a norm is what ES scholars refer to as a *primary institution* – that is, one of the foundational building blocks of international society, along with the balance of power, war, diplomacy, international law, and great power management. These six ideas not only dictate the rules of international relations, but what the game is and who the players are (Buzan, 2014). The norms have been reproduced via discourse and practice throughout the globe and constitute global international society, or the interconnected web of socially determined norms and actors as they all seek “to make the system work” (Watson, 1992, p. 14). However, in addition to primary institutions there are *secondary institutions*, which align with common understandings of what an institution is: NATO or BRICS, for example. Primary and secondary institutions are co-constitutive of one another. In other words, they operate in a feedback loop, whereby primary institutions necessarily delimit the scope and aim of secondary institutions, while small shifts in practice within secondary institutions can over time impact primary institutions (Spandler, 2015).

While these concepts are helpful to explain global processes and normative behavior, ES scholars also acknowledge that the world is neither homogenous nor uniform, and have developed the concept of *regional international society* to explain how clusters of states apply and practice global norms in regionally differentiated ways. Here, history plays an important role

in helping to explain why different geographical regions have arrived at specific interpretations of otherwise global ideas. ES scholars believe that processes of regionalization have begun to accelerate in recent years, and that the extent to which global international society “holds” as a thin unifying mechanism hinges on whether regional international societies continue to find value in “making the system work” and particularly, what kind of meaning continues to be attributed to sovereignty (Flockhart, 2026).

One of the regions identified by ES scholars as increasingly differentiated is Eurasia. While ES scholars spend little time debating the terminology, the term “Eurasia” is applied here to refer that area of the world for which Russia remains the primary actor around which questions relating to trade, security, and movement of peoples revolve. That they share a history of membership in the Soviet Union is of secondary importance, in the sense that not all former Soviet republics can be said to be part of Eurasia – the Baltic states have escaped Russia’s gravitational pull, Ukraine and Moldova are in the process of disconnecting, and even Turkmenistan can be said to have distanced itself from Moscow. Of course, this thesis is specifically interested in the members of the CSTO within Eurasia. Assuming that ES scholars have correctly identified the trend that the world is becoming a “world of regions” (Katzenstein, 2015, p. 1), it will be increasingly important to identify and understand the unique logics underpinning regional activity, including dynamics in secondary institutions such as the CSTO.

This thesis aims to provide an explanatory framework for the CSTO’s pattern of action and inaction, ultimately pointing to why its members find purpose in the alliance. My guiding research question is *How does CSTO member states’ regional conception of sovereignty affect the alliance’s perceived purpose?* I use ES as my theoretical foundation and bring in additional perspectives from sovereignty and alliance literature. My theoretical expectations include that the CSTO’s conception of sovereignty will, in certain aspects, reflect its status as a primary institution and therefore align with globally understood and accepted norms. In other aspects, however, I anticipate finding region-specific interpretations which diverge from global conceptions. In examining sovereignty, I rely on Krasner’s (2009) argument that control and authority are the two foundational aspects along which *types* of sovereignty vary. Within the CSTO, I anticipate that differentiation will occur where and how it conceptualizes control and authority to appropriately lie. In turn, the regional differentiation of sovereignty is anticipated to

inform how member states understand the purpose of the alliance, affecting what kinds of threats the alliance is permitted to exert control over, how authority is legitimated when seeking to activate the alliance in response to a threat, how authority is negotiated between member states, and what kind of boundaries the alliance exerts control over.

My research contributes to three fields of study, including the literature on the CSTO, English School theory, and alliance studies. This thesis helps uncover the norms which guide decision making in the CSTO, filling a gap in the studies on the alliance by uncovering its regional logics from the inside. Rather than accepting assumptions that the institution merely operates as an arm of Russian influence or that it is a failure, this thesis challenges both positions by offering an alternative understanding of norms which guide its behavior in logical ways. Secondly, this thesis serves as an applied example for ES's conceptualization of how primary and secondary institutions are co-constitutive, providing supporting evidence that this mechanism is indeed sufficient in explaining how regional international societies differentiate themselves from both global international society and other regional international societies. Finally, this study challenges alliance literature's tendency to provide sweeping explanations for why states choose to ally and encourages scholars to consider regional motivations which include how member regime type influences states' perception of the purpose of alliance membership.

To examine regional conceptions of sovereignty and its impact on alliance dynamics, I use a qualitative constructivist methodology to inductively research CSTO discourse. Specifically, I rely on framing analysis to evaluate the way the CSTO constructs a relationship between a "cue" – a piece of knowledge – and a "frame," or the discursive presentation of the cue that creates certain meanings while eliminating others. In constructing this relationship between the two elements, a bridge is built between information and what *ought* to be done in reaction. I use Entman's (1993) four uses of framing, "defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies" (p. 52), as a framework to evaluate how the CSTO's frames prime the alliance for specific courses of behavior, including action or inaction, revealing the boundaries of where sovereignty is seen to lie.

I selected five instances within the CSTO's history to investigate in detail. These include both internal and external sources of conflict, intentionally selected to cover a wide range of

types of challenges to sovereignty and different member states. They include domestic unrest in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, which took on ethnic dimensions and raised fears of an Uzbek incursion into the south; domestic protests which threatened to topple the government in Belarus in 2020; the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, specifically in the time period 2020-2023; mass protests in Kazakhstan in 2022 which led to CSTO deployment; and the instance of Ukrainian forces seizing Russian territory in Kursk and Belgorod in 2024. To evaluate these instances, my empirical materials come from the hundreds of publicly available Russian-language documents and news reports from the CSTO's official website.

The thesis begins by providing an overview of ES's main concepts, including regional international society, the interplay between primary and secondary institutions, sovereignty, and alliances to set the theoretical stage with the relevant background necessary for my study. In chapter two, I review my methodology, including my research design, an overview of my case selection, the use of framing analysis as my method, and my empirical source material. Chapter three presents the analysis of my empirical materials, beginning with a broad overview of alliance rhetoric related to sovereignty found in CSTO discourse that is not case-specific before moving on to case-specific analysis. I end the chapter with a summarizing analysis before concluding with a reflection on the implications of my findings for understanding the CSTO's purpose as an alliance and for how ES continues to develop concepts of regional differentiation within regional international societies, particularly in a world shifting towards greater regionality.

Overall, this thesis examines how regional conceptualizations of primary institutions can lead to region-specific logics within secondary institutions, particularly in the context of sovereignty and alliances. By examining the CSTO inductively through its own discursive framing, patterns of appropriateness and acceptability appear which delimit the alliance's understanding of borders, sovereignty, legitimacy, and activity, suggesting that the CSTO deserves a more nuanced understanding than "paper alliance" descriptors provide.

1. Chapter One: Theoretical Framework: The English School and the Purpose of an Alliance in a World of Regions

My research is grounded in ES's framework of international society, specifically regional international society. This chapter opens with a broad examination of the main ideas in ES before more closely examining the ways in which ES understands the world to have regional variation and its implications for the changing global order. Considering the importance ES places on primary institutions, especially sovereignty, I pivot towards an examination of the concept before turning to a discussion of security alliances as instruments for the protection of sovereignty and examine how their purpose is theorized. I conclude the chapter with a brief discussion of the theoretical expectations from my research.

1.1 Global and Regional International Society

ES synthesizes and synchronizes concepts otherwise treated as separate, and at times incompatible, ideas spread across various theoretical fields of IR. It views world politics “as a social context in which order is continuously negotiated, debated, implemented, and produced” (Costa-Buranelli, 2021, p. 11), and aims to create a cohesive framework for understanding global political relationships. ES has three primary concepts: international system, international society, and world society.

Figure 1: Three foundational concepts in the English School

ES concept	Philosophical grounding	IR approach and epistemology	Conceptual focus
International system	Hobbes/Machiavelli	Realism and neorealism, positivist approaches	Anarchy, state, power, structures
International society	Grotius	Constructivism and rationalism, interpretivist and historical approaches	Identity, interests, norms, institutions
World society	Kant	Revolutionism, critical theory	Individuals, populations, non-state actors

Source: Compiled by the author based on Buzan, 2014, pp. 12-14, 23-24.

One of ES's foundational theorists, Hedley Bull (1977), conceptualizes the international system as a relationship between, at minimum, two states which exert “sufficient impact on one

another's decisions, to cause them to behave - at least in some measure – as parts of a whole” (p. 9). The mechanics of this relationship largely align with realism's emphasis on power politics and are widely explored in IR scholarship. The concept of anarchy remains a central focus of the international system, and analysis typically occurs at the structural level (Buzan, 2014). Classical studies of alliances fall under this category as they seek to explain state behavior as part of a structural relationship occurring within a state of anarchy.

The next layer of analysis, however, is what Buzan (2014) calls ES's “flagship theory” (p. 5). International society conceptualizes interstate relations as institutionalized via the establishment of shared social practices such as norms, rules, identities, and interests (Buzan, 2014, p. 12). Essentially, ES argues that just as structural forces such as states and power affect human individuals, so too do humans influence the structures they live within. Although inspired and informed by sociology's emphasis on the social relations between individuals, ES insists that larger societal units are distinct from individuals and require separate study. In this sense, international society is not a study of individuals impacting their political environment, but on collective human societies shaping the norms, identity, and interests which in turn affect the international system of power and state relations. ES scholars would situate a norm like sovereignty as having developed within international society.

Finally, the third layer of analysis, world society, removes the state from the center of interrogation and instead centers people and populations as the forces determining political currents. In contrast to international society, the individual is a relevant player at the level of world society. Entities such as non-state actors, refugees and migrants, advocacy groups, diasporas, terrorist organizations, and others are the focus of the world society layer and help ES make sense of how individuals and populations influence the social currents which, in turn, impact the norms shaping the layer above, international society. While world society does not play a large role in my study, it nevertheless is helpful to keep in mind how ES theorizes international society as sitting between two other dimensions which influence the development of norms and interests.

For an examination of, in my case, the norm of sovereignty, international society is the appropriate dimension and will remain my focus. One of the assumptions underpinning the idea of international society is that “it pays to make the system work” (Watson, 1992, p. 14). In other

words, agreeing on a minimum set of social rules is beneficial for everyone, and this agreement “encourages the realization of the goals and institutions that make these rules effective” (Flockhart, 2016, p. 12). This assumption contains implications for the understanding of cooperation, interests, and legitimacy, essentially implying that self-interest leads to cooperation-based benefits at the broadest level and that cooperation is a source of legitimacy, allowing ideas to be implemented at scale. While the international system level of analysis can explain mechanisms characterized by “material causality” (Buzan, 2014, p. 22), the international society level concerns itself with social interactions and the tensions that arise out of them. Ultimately, ES scholars are interested in interrogating *why* the world works as it does, especially as there exist frameworks of order (in the sense of patterns of behavior and organization) that operate at a level above the state.

These frameworks of order are referred to as *institutions* by ES scholars, and they currently cover the globe as a “thin” layer of generally agreed upon principles. Because the word “institution” both refers to the classic entity theorized by liberal institutionalists and broader social-political concepts, ES scholars, beginning with Bull (1977), developed a distinction between kinds of institutions. *Primary institutions* are “deep and relatively durable practices” of abstract customs (Buzan, 2014, p. 16) such as diplomacy or international law, while *secondary institutions* align generally with institutionalists’ understanding, and are entities created for specific purposes, such as international organizations like the UN or alliances like NATO (see Figure 2 for comparison). While secondary institutions are intentionally created, primary institutions evolve organically in the sense that the chain of intentional decisions is so diffused across space and time that their origins are vague and cannot be reduced to a single group of individuals or states. Spandler (2015) argues that the defining boundary between the two types of institutions is their level of specificity, in the sense that primary institutions are not created with “regard to specific situations or actors” while secondary institutions possess “temporally and spatially discrete” application to a “clearly defined set of actors” (p. 613). The two in tandem provide the social foundations and logistical necessities for a minimum amount of global order to be maintained (Flockhart, 2016). Primary institutions’ diffuse manner of emergence gives them high levels of legitimacy in defining what is acceptable behavior in the international sphere, so much so that they essentially define “criteria for membership in international society” (Buzan, 2014, p. 17) in addition to “the rules of the game and what the pieces are” (p. 31).

Figure 2: Differences between primary and secondary institutions

	Source	Purpose	Examples
Primary institution	Evolved from long-term historical processes.	To regulate how diffuse societies interact with each other along shared, legitimate principles because norms permit order beneficial for all.	Diplomacy, great power management, sovereignty
Secondary institution	Established by individuals or states, typically with a specific date of founding.	To manage the logistics and resources required for an acceptable amount of order to be established.	WHO, NATO

Source: Compiled by author based on Buzan, 2014, pp. 16-17, 30

The classic set of primary institutions accepted by ES scholars includes “sovereignty, territoriality, the balance of power, war, diplomacy, international law and great power management” (Buzan, 2014, p. 17). Indeed, the absence of any one of these concepts would fundamentally change the nature of global politics, but this list is not without contestation. Bull (1977) in his seminal text did not include sovereignty, which Brewin (1982) and James (1986) later argued was worthy of inclusion. Other contenders for primary institution status include nonintervention, nationalism, human equality, and the market, but these lack consensus (Buzan, 2014; Buzan and Schouenborg, 2018). Only those primary institutions which can sustain long-term legitimacy continue in existence; otherwise they are supplanted by other ideas which do possess the legitimacy needed to be adopted at scale (Buzan and Schouenborg, 2018). Most of the ideas underpinning current primary institutions can be traced back to those practiced first by European polities, which then spread throughout the rest of the world via a not insignificant amount of coercion (Buzan and Schouenborg, 2018). Bull and Watson (1984) refer to this as the “expansion story,” and this is an important point to keep in mind when reflecting on how norms which originated outside of a region’s context come to be accepted, interpreted, and applied.

The impact of primary institutions on secondary institutions, such as the relationship between sovereignty and an alliance, is a major focus for ES theorists as they seek to understand how social constructions deeply embedded in societies become manifest and are supported by secondary institutions. Spandler (2015) has proposed an “entangled” (p. 609) relationship of constitution and institutionalization by which “positive feedback processes lead to path dependence” (p. 614) as primary and secondary institutions both reinforce one another through

discursive means. In his model, secondary institutions mirror primary institutions insofar as primary institutions constrain what is possible and reinforce the expectations inherent in them. Equally, secondary institutions can be locations of incremental change as norms are practiced repetitively and begin to vary over time; these tiny shifts can have outsized impact during periods of “critical junctures” (p. 619) – exogenous shocks which provide a window for meaningful change to occur based on actor responses. Knudsen (2019) expands on Spandler’s thesis by arguing that secondary institutions both are “means and drivers” (p. 24) of change within primary institutions, as well as operating as spaces of reproduction for primary institutions, using the UN Security Council as an example of a secondary institution reinforcing great power management (p. 41). However, Navari (2019) emphasizes that change is much less frequent than repetition and reproduction of norms. Significant change in the world is not to be found within changes in secondary institutions, but in how shifts in international society’s primary institutions manifest themselves in secondary institutions (p. 72).

One strand of ES research affected by conceptualizing the constitutive relationship between primary and secondary institutions is its implications for “regional institutional architecture” (Knudsen, 2019, p. 43) and how this may result in regionally-specific varieties of primary institutions. Although contemporary ES scholars (Buzan & Zhang, 2014; Buzan & Schouenborg, 2018) argue that today’s international society is a *global international society* because primary institutions are accepted broadly by most states, they also acknowledge that there exist “contestations” and “variations in practice” when it comes to primary institutions (Buzan and Schouenborg, 2018, pp. 20, 29). Such regional differentiation within international society is conceptualized by Buzan and Schouenborg (2018) to result in *regional international society*, which is a geographically contiguous area with regionally unique practices informed by its specific history and culture. Regional international societies operate on a level between *state* and *global international society*.

A major feature of the differentiation visible in international society is hierarchical, despite primary institutions such as sovereign equality and nationalism holding widespread legitimacy and empire being largely delegitimized (Buzan & Schouenborg, 2018). Nevertheless, “the idea that there should be privileged actors in global international society has been remarkably durable” (p. 132). They have theorized a system of unequal differentiation occurring

along three axes: segmentary, stratificatory, and functional (pp. 20-21). Segmentary differentiation occurs within the types of social subsystems, which in IR are primarily states. Stratificatory differentiation occurs when units operate in a hierarchical manner. Finally, functional differentiation occurs along lines of similar activities.

Figure 3: Kinds of differentiation

Type of differentiation	Field of division	Resulting institutions
Segmentary	States	Nationalism, sovereignty
Stratificatory	Empire, hegemony, core/periphery relations, first/second/third worlds, great power privileges	Colonialism, great power management
Functional	Commerce, legal frameworks, religious movements, scientific/educational fields, military structures, etc.	The market, international law

Compiled by the author based on Buzan & Schouenborg, 2018, pp. 20-21.

Their framework helps to understand the lines along which global international society should *not* be understood as a “homogeneous construction” (Buzan & Schouenborg, 2018, p. 20). While scholars in ES begin their theorizing of international society at a high enough level to conceptualize the “lowest common denominators” (primary institutions) (p. 103) which are widely accepted, they also interrogate the ways in which international society is contested and challenged – ultimately existing in a persistent state of flux whereby its evolution continues into some unknown future form.

However, what this means in practice is that in order to evaluate the relationship between a primary institution and a secondary institution, one has to consider not only the conceptualization of the primary institution on the global level but also weigh how it is regionally interpreted and understood. Finnemore and Sikkink (1999) highlight the role that communication plays when existing and emerging norms meet. The tension that results is handled through a process of framing the “linkages” (p. 268) between the two to facilitate the successful merger and acceptance in society. These processes result in regionally specific interpretations and applications of norms in international society, including primary institutions. Similarly, Acharya (2004) explored norm localization in ASEAN as the grouping “incorporated

[foreign norms] into local norms” (p. 241), which occurred when foreign norms presented sufficient opportunity to be molded into regionally acceptable forms that fold in local belief structures.

Buzan and Schouenborg (2018) argue that in a world of regional international societies, primary institutions retain a “core meaning” (p. 103) which is surrounded by a “protective belt” of localized practices and understandings (Lasmar, Zahreddine, & Lage, 2015, pp. 476-7). Costa-Buranelli (2015) examined how sovereignty is locally interpreted in East Asia, where even commenting on other states’ domestic activities is strongly discouraged (p. 506). In Europe, sovereignty has evolved in a new, localized direction with the EU’s practice of shared sovereignty and large collection of secondary institutions to facilitate sovereignty sharing (Buzan and Schouenborg, 2018, p. 105). Within Central Asia there is disagreement over which primary institutions are most important. Pourchot and Stivachtis (2013) argue that the main contenders are “sovereignty, diplomacy, trade, balance of power, and great power management” (p. 73), while Costa-Buranelli (2021) provides a slightly different list: “sovereignty, diplomacy, international law, authoritarianism, and great power management” (p. 15). All these examples reveal how global international society is by no means a “smooth” surface of interaction and agreement and can take on regionally varied forms.

Several ES scholars have begun to theorize where current forces may be leading international society as contestation over visions for world order increases, particularly in the 2020s. Flockhart (2016) suggests that the Western-led liberal international society is fading and that the trend we approach is that of “several international societies” (p. 18) constructing a “multi-order” (p. 23) network of identities. She suggests that a minimum of three “orders” (essentially, regional international societies) are visible: “the American-led liberal international order, the Russian-led Eurasian order, and the Chinese-led Belt and Road order” (Flockhart, 2026, p. 3), each of which has “very different dynamics and different behavioral patterns” (p. 3). A number of “swing states” also exist which pursue relations with two or more orders, such as Brazil and India (p. 11). She positions the idea of the “good life” (Cooper, 1985) at the core of what constitutes an order, whereby a particular order offers a vision for what constitutes the good life, the definition of which provides a “moral compass for appropriate behavior and a vision for the future” (p. 5). When the definition of the good life changes, so too does the nature of the

order change – exemplified by the American-led order and the upheaval under Trump, who has offered a fundamentally different vision of the good life in comparison to previous US administrations. Acharya (2017), in a similar but slightly different vein, coined the concept of “multiplexity” to describe the trend of increasing de-centeredness and plurality. In a multiplex world, there is no global hegemon (despite continued hierarchies), non-state actors play increasingly impactful roles, and functional areas of society are interdependent on factors beyond and across state borders (Acharya, Estevadeordal, & Goodman, 2023).

Flockhart (2026) argues that the extent to which the broadest primary institutions will survive in a “thin” version of international society is largely dependent on “the orders’ attachments to the principle of sovereignty” (p. 10). This means that the field of ES is ripe for deeper interrogations into how various regional international societies perceive and interpret the primary institution of sovereignty in regionally differentiated ways. While Putin’s Eurasian order is based on “subjugation, force, and ... strict control of (mis)information and fear” (Flockhart & Korosteleva, 2022, p. 471), his definition of the good life “is far from enthusiastically shared” (p. 477). And indeed, the concept of sovereignty within the broader Eurasian space is especially salient, both because of Russia’s ongoing war in Ukraine but also because of the many instances where sovereignty is (or was) contested: Transnistria, Chechnya, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the vulnerability of the Tajik-Afghan border, the many border spats between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, or Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, not to mention the many instances of domestic protests challenging the internal sovereignty of various governments.

Overall, ES has established that primary institutions fundamentally impact how secondary institutions are shaped but has also argued that primary institutions are regionally interpreted to fit into existing norms within a given regional international society. Therefore, in order to examine a secondary institution such as an alliance, comprehending the regional interpretation of a primary institution such as sovereignty is essential. I turn now to an examination of how sovereignty has been conceptualized in the existing literature.

1.2 Sovereignty as a Primary Institution

Bull (1977) bases the entirety of international relations on the existence of states, which “assert sovereignty” (p. 8) over a specific territory and population. Expanding upon this, Holsti (2004) ascribes sovereignty its role as a primary institution in ES due to how sovereignty operates as a

“critical component of the *birth, maintenance, and death* of states” (p. 113, emphasis in the original). As a primary institution, sovereignty plays both a fundamental role in understanding global international society while existing as a socially constructed norm – an invention, an “arrangement of political life” (Jackson, 1999, p. 432) or “ascription of a status” (Kratochwil, 2012, p. 134). This means it is contested and irregularly interpreted, shifting as decisions are made which reinforce or weaken common understandings. Hinsley (1969) distills a simple essence from the concept: “sovereignty ... is an assumption about authority” (p. 275). Indeed, sovereignty asks *who* has authority *where*.

Jackson (1999) argues that the norm of state sovereignty is a major aspect of what sets apart the modern era from past eras, which were largely dominated by the right of conquest. During the historical development of the sovereignty norm, one emergent form was *imperial sovereignty*, seen when a political power “exercises supreme authority over a foreign territory” (Jackson, 1999, p. 441). Imperial sovereignty was influenced and informed by older norms imbued in polities during medieval Christendom: “the moral inequality of peoples, the right of intervention, the right of conquest, and ultimately the right of colonization” (p. 443). These norms became increasingly seen as illegitimate as the notion of self-determination of peoples counterbalanced the idea that a state could lay claim to regions composed of foreign populations. As the illegitimacy of imperial sovereignty reached its pinnacle in the 19th and 20th centuries, territory became the defining feature of the legal limits of sovereignty. During this time, citizenship as a concept became closely linked to a state’s sovereignty (Krasner, 2009) and became the medium through which sovereignty was removed from the conceptual realm and made tangible for populations.

Within the post-1945 global international society of sovereign nation-states, Krasner (2009) argues that sovereignty as a concept has been generally applied in four different forms. These include international legal sovereignty, or the practice of states recognizing each other’s legal right to exist and operate as a state; Westphalian sovereignty, or the absence of foreign authorities operating within a state’s territorial boundaries; domestic sovereignty, or Weber’s monopoly of violence as state authorities exercise “effective control” within their territory; and finally, inter-dependence sovereignty, or the capacity of the state to regulate cross-border financial flows, information, ideas, people, or materials (p. 179). He situates the issues of

“control and authority” as the defining features that characterize his four categories, whereby the first two are primarily questions around authority, the third a question of control and authority, and the last merely concerned with control (p. 180). States may possess various combinations of these kinds of sovereignties. For example, China possesses international legal sovereignty, yet Taiwan prevents it from claiming domestic sovereignty over all territory it claims as theirs. A state like North Korea has a high level of inter-dependence sovereignty, while most capitalist democracies have much lower levels of inter-dependence sovereignty. De-facto states such as Transnistria or Abkhazia lack international legal sovereignty and Westphalian sovereignty but possess domestic sovereignty, while Haiti lacks domestic sovereignty but claims international legal sovereignty.

Krasner’s international legal sovereignty can perhaps be considered its most “traditional” form, and the form which is most associated with ES’s categorization of it as a primary institution. Specifically, Jackson (1999) argues that sovereignty is an “expression [of] the value of international legal equality” (p. 455) and is essentially a state’s entry ticket to participation in the international order. This participation, however, does not come with unchecked permission to act; sovereign states (in theory) “enjoy a right of non-intervention” but the concept does not grant them *freedom to act* however they please (Jackson, 1999, p. 455). As Kratochwil (2012) argues, speech acts play a major role in how states “practice” their sovereignty as they “claim decision-making authority on the basis of this exercise of a right” (p. 132). In claiming this authority, paths of action open to them and are legitimized.

Jackson (1999) further separates sovereignty into two categories: *negative sovereignty*, or the “freedom from outside interference” and *positive sovereignty*, or capacity for a state’s authorities and institutions “to be their own masters” (p. 29). He views the former as an absolute legal category, either possessed or not possessed, with no halfway measures possible. The latter concept, however, he fleshes out in the context of the legacy of imperialism and the existence of what he calls *quasi-states*. A quasi-state is a state which lacks the institutional capacity to effectively manage its internal affairs (Krasner would identify this as a question of control) such that it can contribute to the wellbeing of its population and therefore is highly dependent on a particular regime or individual ruler (pp. 21-23). In these cases, the state lacks positive sovereignty and often becomes semi-dependent on international structures beyond their

influence. This could take the form of international fiscal policies and currency regulations, military support from a more powerful partner, or even international development aid.

In recent decades, the strictly legal conceptualization of sovereignty has been challenged. In the 1990s and 2000s, questions arose, particularly among UN circles, about the limits of sovereign rights. UN General Secretary Boutros Boutros-Ghali stated in 1992 that “the time of absolute and exclusive sovereignty has passed; its theory was never matched by reality” (United Nations, 1992). Dialogue around WMDs, failed states, genocide, refugees, and terrorism prompted serious questions around sovereignty’s usefulness if it failed to prevent crises of international scale (Jackson, 2003). As debate raged around the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, some suggested the meaning of sovereignty was shifting to refer to the societal trust that populations place in their political institutions to fulfil their duties as states (International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, 2001). Other scholars, in the context of the War on Terror, suggested that the principle of non-intervention deriving from sovereignty does not apply in cases of “tyrants” (Tesón, 2005). In these instances, the concept of sovereignty is unhitched from the authority of the state as such and relocated to exist among a social duty the authority holds vis-a-vis its domestic population and international obligations. Kratochwil (2012) argues that the idea of “protection” has become tightly linked with the right to possess sovereignty, determined by whether a state can protect its citizens from disaster, crisis, and violations of human rights.

In response to globalization, some theorists have suggested that sovereignty has come to mean “autonomy,” particularly as it relates to a state’s ability to dictate economic policy and “insulate oneself ... from outside influences” (Keohane, 1995, p. 177). This is reflected in the myriad qualified shapes “sovereignty” takes today: energy sovereignty, defense sovereignty, fiscal sovereignty, tech sovereignty, and so on. The application of sovereignty to these contexts reflects a distinct understanding that sovereignty is *freedom from* external institutional forces and the ability to make decisions independent of other actors. However, even this definition is challenged; in a 2019 speech, Mario Draghi, then head of the European Central Bank, argued that sovereignty is “the ability to control outcomes and respond to the fundamental needs of the people” (Draghi, 2019). Once again Krasner’s issue of control comes to the fore as political

institutions struggle to understand how to make sense of a territorially-bounded state system in a world of multinational corporations and digital connectivity.

Sovereignty, despite operating as a primary institution, does not hold a single definition and is dependent on the historical contexts of a particular time period to contribute meaningful utility to global affairs. However, in each setting – ranging from imperial invocations of sovereignty over colonial territories to contemporary discussions of protection – the fundamental ideas at stake are Krasner’s binary conceptualization of authority and control. Who has authority, how is it bound or restricted, where does control lie, and to what extent does the authority and control overlap or diverge? How these questions are answered results in moments of coalescence with significant consequences for decision-making and state behavior in a global setting. When previously acceptable answers are no longer deemed appropriate for the current setting, the understanding of sovereignty evolves into a new form.

These questions are particularly relevant when it comes to thinking about security alliances. An alliance pools authority, while its treaty places restrictions on the settings in which that authority may be applied. If control is intended to lie with the state during periods of peace, what amount of control must be lost during conflict before the alliance is perceived as a legitimate option to restore the member-state's control? Territory and population are closely bound together with notions of sovereignty, which requires a certain amount of agreement within an alliance on the boundaries of its mandate. How these items are addressed within a given alliance demonstrates how it understands sovereignty and, by extension, gives shape to the alliance’s purpose as a deterrent against threats to its regional conception of sovereignty.

1.3 Alliances in International Society: From Universal to Region-Specific Logics

Taking Waltz’s (1979) assumption that one of a state’s main goals is to maintain its own existence, then any breach of its sovereignty places the state’s continued existence in question. Military attacks not only violate the principal “benefit” of sovereignty, non-intervention, but they immediately challenge the state’s ability to exert control over its borders and, in many cases, domestically over its population as well. In order to prevent such attacks, states often turn to security alliances as sources of deterrence. In addition to being sources for the protection of sovereignty, they also challenge the principle of sovereignty in that alliance membership typically requires renouncing some aspects of it (Morrow, 1993). Alliance exercises require

allowing foreign troops to operate on one's territory and membership runs the risk of being dragged into unwanted conflicts. As Waltz (1979) positions it, "states do not willingly place themselves in situations of increased dependence" (p. 107). Therefore, states must possess compelling reasons for the benefit they find in alliance membership such that the aversion to giving up some portion of their sovereignty is considered an acceptable autonomy cost.

Yet if we accept the premises laid out by ES – global international society, the existence of primary and secondary institutions, and the ways these forces constitutively interact with one another in global *and* regional contexts to both reinforce and shift understandings of primary institutions – it follows that institutions like alliances also perform regionally relevant roles in ways that iterate on globally general conceptions of their use. In anticipating regional international societies to develop historically informed conceptualizations of primary institutions through processes of localization and differentiation, the effects of these processes will have downstream impact on secondary institutions, which can be expected to also become regionally unique. Because security alliances require navigating the tension of giving up some portion of sovereignty, regional conceptions of that primary institution hold significant implications for understanding alliance behavior in an associated region.

Within traditional realist and neorealist thought, two theories have dominated explanations for why states are compelled to ally. Waltz's (1979) balance-of-power theory argues that in anarchic self-help systems wherein states are continually trying to ensure their survival, they seek to balance the distribution of power in such a way that is beneficial to them. To this end, they choose to either ally with one another to build up their external-facing resources and capabilities, or to bandwagon against the source of power. Building off this idea but adjusting the causal mechanism for balancing and bandwagoning is Walt's (1985) balance-of-threat theory which states that countries choose to "ally with or against the most *threatening* power" (emphasis in the original, pp. 8-9). He argues threats are determined by "aggregate power, proximity, offensive capability, and offensive intentions" (p. 9). In both these theories, the alliance exists to provide protection to the vulnerable party, while the enemy (either the greater power or the greater threat) is specifically located outside the boundaries of the allying state. Studies have indeed shown that when minor powers have a major power ally, conflict is less likely to escalate to a militarized interstate dispute (MID) (Siverson & Tennefoss, 1984).

The deterrence that comes from alliance with a major power is palpable – the risk of MID for a minor power is much higher when there is no major power ally (Siverson & Tennefoss, 1984). This demonstrates that security alliances are indeed useful to the minor power in reducing the possibility of its involvement in an MID.

However, there also seem to be other motivations to ally. Within the bounds of Siverson & Tennefoss' (1984) study, they found no instances of an allied minor power initiating a conflict with a major power (conversely, there were instances of non-allied minor powers initiating an MID with major powers). They explain this likely stemming from the major power in the alliance effectively controlling the minor powers to prevent them from “initiat[ing] conflicts potentially too costly for the major power” (p. 1064). This dynamic was found to be present in the majority of alliances by Morrow (1991), whereby alliances operate as a forum for the control of one ally by another (see also Weitsman, 2004). From this perspective, the major power gains increased control over the foreign policy choices of allied minor powers. The alliance therefore grants the major power influence that is not present when an alliance is lacking.

However, the unifying factor in these traditional examinations of alliance dynamics is an underlying assumption of the threat's external locationality. The state's sovereignty is at risk only due to foreign state-based threats, and it is assumed that alliances are appropriate structures for addressing such threats but not others. Domestic threats to sovereignty are presumed to fall outside the alliance's purview, but I suggest that this is shortsighted when thinking about what states can receive from security alliance membership. To this extent, it is worth noting that much (although not all) alliance research disregards the regime type of its members as a relevant variable. One scholar who did investigate the impact of regime type on alliance behavior (Kimball, 2006) found that regime type, specifically authoritarian regimes, increased the likelihood of allying prior to 1945 and decreased after 1945. She suggests that regime type as an influential variable fluctuates over time, which may also explain why many alliance scholars of the late 20th century and early 21st have been hesitant to consider it relevant. However, recent scholarship in the adjacent field of international organizations have revealed that domestic governance structures influence behavior. If this is true, then we may be returning to an era in which regime type is a variable meriting attention within the field of alliance research, particularly as democratization trends reverse (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022).

A brief note about the terms “authoritarian” and “illiberal,” both used in the wider literature on this topic and in this section, is due. I pull from Linz’s (1964, p. 297) classical definition for authoritarian governments, which describes a political system marked by its limited political pluralism, lack of a particular ideology, lack of political mobilization, and the use of power by an individual or small group within poorly defined limits. Since my discussion remains largely at the international level rather than deeply examining the nuances of authoritarian domestic governance, further exposition regarding types of authoritarian governments is beyond the scope of this work. “Illiberal” governments, a contemporary term, pulls from Laruelle’s (2022) conceptualization, whereby illiberal governance is movement away from a former liberal political structure towards a “thin” ideology characterized by anti-liberalist stances across all levels of society, an emphasis on sovereignty and economic protectionism, and a “shift from politics to culture” that she calls “post-postmodern” (p. 309). While the terms describe separate phenomena, both refer to modes of governance resistant to democratic practices, and in this sense are applied in similar contexts to discuss why these states are motivated to cooperate with each other in international forums.

Due to fundamental differences in domestic political structures and the need for authoritarian governments to distribute goods to their elite supporters (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2010), it follows that foreign and regional policy operates as a tool to secure such goods (Erdmann, Bank, Hoffmann, & Richter, 2013). This mechanism links domestic and foreign policy in a manner which is absent in liberal-democratic countries and has significant downstream implications. It is certainly comprehensible why alliance theory focuses so much on external sources of threats, yet if we assume that authoritarian leaders’ primary goal is to retain their position in office, then at least three additional threats appear with increased salience: (1) domestic elite insiders rebelling against the ruling individual or coalition through a coup, (2) rebel or successionist groups seeking to overthrow the regime and instigating civil war, and (3) pro-democracy movements seeking a transition to liberal democratic rule (Cottiero, Hafner-Burton, Haggard, Prather, & Schneider, 2024). Democratic systems are structured to absorb domestic turmoil in a way that is not considered threatening to the entire system; it is not unusual for a previously high-ranking figure to become head of state via election, a political party to emerge which has a significantly different platform than its pre-existing peers, or successionist urges to be expressed via demonstrations and inter-party bargaining. In states which lack these

outlets, what begins as similar frustrations ultimately leads to different outcomes. One of these outcomes is different perceptions of what constitutes a threat, affecting state behavior on the international stage.

Liberalists, particularly neoliberals, have praised regional organizations (ROs) and international organizations (IOs) as useful tools for trade and increased economic prosperity, operating on a basis of trust in member commitments and improved sense of predictability of other states' actions (Cho, 2012; Libman and Obydenkova, 2018). Authoritarian regimes, however, have a different *raison d'être* for RO membership. In these cases, the RO operates as a source of legitimacy for participating governments, who want to signal they participate in global norms (Libman and Obydenkova, 2018). Cho (2012) similarly has found that illiberal states want to “minimize the cost incurred by not complying with the dominant system” (p. 161). Libman and Obydenkova (2018) compare the contemporary practice of participating in ROs with European powers collecting overseas colonial territories in the 1880s: in both cases, governments could demonstrate to domestic audiences that they are positioned in “the rightful place in the world” (p. 153).

However, authoritarians have grappled with the post-World War II trend of the Western world using IOs as tools of democracy promotion and diffusion alongside their economic utility (Libman & Obydenkova, 2018), resulting in a situation where authoritarians have felt compelled to utilize the structure but not the substance of IOs and ROs. Instead, IOs dominated by authoritarian regimes are “sites of coordination” (Cottiero, Hafner-Burton, Haggard, Prather, & Schneider, 2024, p. 241), whereby membership provides benefits defined by their needs: spaces for learning from each other, providing access to financial resources during political crisis, or ensuring access to goods for redistribution to domestic elites. Indeed, moments of democratization such as the wave of color revolutions in the 2000s, and the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, prompted increased cooperation among illiberal regimes as they sought to utilize each other as sources of support for their own regime survival (Cottiero, Hafner-Burton, Haggard, Prather, & Schneider, 2024).

Indeed, studies show that those authoritarian governments which become members in IOs dominated by authoritarian peers experience lower odds of democratization (Cottiero & Haggard, 2023; Debre, 2022). Similarly, Boutton (2019) found authoritarian states utilize their

alliance membership as insurance for more aggressive elite purging than is undertaken in authoritarian states without alliance support. Alliances, in this case, “incentiv[ize]” violence against internal enemies and further stymies “inclusive forms of government” (p. 14). These studies hold significant implications for security alliances. If authoritarian states possess a fundamentally different relationship between domestic and foreign policy because the ruling regime must distribute resources to the elite and highly values regime preservation, it is only logical that this factor would impact the contexts whereby the regime is willing to pool sovereignty, accept limitations to its own control, agree to potentially intervene in a conflict on behalf of another member-state (which could prove to be domestically unpopular, thereby threatening the regime), or request alliance assistance itself to support its authority. Equally, however, authoritarian regimes do not appear to universally call on alliances to intervene during times of domestic crisis, suggesting that some additional factor (regional conceptions of sovereignty) is at play in conditioning the patterns of alliance activity.

Alliances dominated by authoritarian regimes operate in response to the primary goal of their governments, which is to retain power. The most salient threats may not necessarily originate externally to one’s borders, but that does not mean that security alliances are not fit for purpose or irrelevant to authoritarians. Sovereignty’s external and internal components mean that security alliances as (secondary) institutions to protect against threats to sovereignty remain highly relevant. However, as a primary institution like sovereignty adjusts to regional historical and cultural contexts, the regional alliance dynamics will also reflect the relevant primary institutions, *as regionally understood*. This, in turn, affects states’ perceptions of what purpose they understand alliance membership to fulfill.

1.4 Theoretical Expectations

The ES theoretical framework argues that primary institutions vary at the regional level and due to the co-constitutive processes linking primary and secondary institutions, any regional variation in a primary institution will impact how secondary institutions are structured. Security alliances at their core exist to deter breeches of sovereignty. From that, it follows that localized definitions of sovereignty would impact how alliance members view the purpose of a security alliance and the role it is supposed to play in responding to challenges to sovereignty. As Krasner (2009) argued, the different kinds of sovereignty visible today can be reduced to their base form as

varying emphasis on control and authority, applied across a range of contexts. Taking these as the two “core” principles found in the concept of sovereignty, regional interpretations can be expected to also contain these two elements but reconstructed in ways which reflect local understandings about where control and authority are appropriately located and applied. Finally, conceptions of sovereignty will influence how a state views the purpose of an alliance. Regional contexts which emphasize international legal sovereignty are more likely to see alliance members locate the alliance’s purpose in its protection of borders from threats located outside the alliance. In contrast, states which emphasize domestic sovereignty perceive alliances as useful tools to support political stability at home, crafting institutions to support this goal and evolving inter-alliance norms to facilitate pro-regime resource sharing.

Applying this theory to my selected case, I anticipate that secondary institutions in Flockhart & Korosteleva’s (2022) “Eurasian order,” or regional international society, will reflect the localized interpretations of primary institutions. Specifically, I expect CSTO member-states to locate the purpose of the alliance (in the sense of what the alliance is useful for) in a context which reflects the regional differentiation of sovereignty as a primary institution, informed, but not entirely dependent, by their authoritarian regimes. Ultimately, I anticipate the regional interpretation of sovereignty to impact the alliance such that a framework of logic emerges which explains the CSTO’s otherwise puzzling pattern of activity and inactivity. In chapter two, I break down the methodology behind my approach and in chapter three I analyze how the relationship between sovereignty and the alliance has played out across five instances of challenges to sovereignty from a variety of threats.

2. Chapter Two: Methodology

This chapter details the methodology for my research. I begin by explaining the research design, case selection, and empirical sources, and end by detailing the method of analysis.

2.1 Research Design

My research focuses on two primary features: sovereignty and alliance purpose, specifically how the two are co-constitutive in the context of regional international society. I selected sovereignty out of the six main primary institutions because of the foundational role it plays in contemporary state relations and the stakes at play if regional interpretations of it subsume its semi-stable “core” global meaning. It possesses ample room for local interpretations to be grafted onto it, making it ripe for deeper interrogation. Sovereignty’s capacity for regional variation holds implications for both researchers and policymakers, particularly in thinking about how interpretations of sovereignty could impact other areas of state behavior such as alliances.

This thesis is constructed as a single-case study focusing on the CSTO within Eurasian regional international society. The CSTO exists within the context of a broader geographical tendency for regionality, beginning with a shared history in the Russian Empire through to the Soviet Union, and in other contemporary institutions such as the CIS and EAEU. Therefore, it stands out as having a high likelihood for regional norm development. Alternative security relationships among CSTO member states either exist on a bilateral level, or in the context of the SCO which blurs the line of regionality due to the scope of its membership. Therefore, the CSTO is the “cleanest” case to examine how regional conceptions of sovereignty in Eurasia impact how members understand the purpose of a security alliance. Within my single case, I have selected five instances to serve as observations of alliance behavior for deeper interrogation, described and justified in section 2.2 below.

Measuring a norm like sovereignty will necessarily rely on qualitative categories and measurements. Indeed, as a social construction, sovereignty is an idea rooted in discourse and expressed through behavior. In order to locate where sovereignty is regionally understood to belong, I rely on Krasner’s (2009) nexus of authority and control as the two categories to guide my research in examining *who* has authority, under *what* conditions, and *where* sources of appropriate authority are located. Furthermore, the question of control is examined in *how*

sovereignty is expressed and *in which contexts* resources are seen as “appropriately” being applied to protect sovereignty. Answers to these questions will inductively illuminate the “boundaries” of the regional definition of sovereignty. At the end of my analysis, I additionally rely on Krasner’s four categories of sovereignty (international legal sovereignty, Westphalian sovereignty, domestic sovereignty, and interdependence sovereignty) as ideal types against which I evaluate where the CSTO’s conception of sovereignty can be positioned in comparison.

To measure an alliance’s purpose, which I define as the circumstances under which members’ perceive the alliance to be the appropriate instrument to support members’ security, I look for a combination of two factors: expressions of appropriateness regarding alliance activity in a given context (rooted in discourse) and the factual details around alliance activity (how did the alliance act, using what methods). The latter is an “objective” component insofar that it is concerned with action, not discourse, but it is necessarily limited by what is publicly available knowledge. While significant alliance action such as a military response cannot be hidden, other kinds of coordination or information-sharing can easily occur behind the scenes or remain classified. In that sense, the limitations of this measurement are acknowledged.

Throughout, my guiding research question is *How does CSTO member states’ regional conception of sovereignty affect the alliance’s perceived purpose?* Since my focus is on examining a primary institution – the norm of sovereignty – in a regional international society, I rely on an interpretive constructivist approach, specifically utilizing the method of frame analysis (presented below in section 2.3) to interrogate empirical source materials. Interpretive constructivist approaches permit scholars to investigate claims as social constructions, examining how societies come to accept certain practices or understandings as “normal.”

2.2 Case Selection: The CSTO and Sovereignty as a Primary Institution in Eurasian Regional International Society

In selecting five observances for deeper investigation within the context of the CSTO, I aimed to choose instances which held significant importance to the affected state, stemmed from a wide range of potential threats, and impacted various members. These selection criteria align with my aim to probe the alliance for indications of its regional conceptualization of sovereignty. By selecting instances of high importance to the affected state, this raises the salience of the perceived threat and increases the likelihood that the member state would engage an external

entity (such as an alliance) for assistance. The approach of the member state and the response by the alliance can both serve as indicators for where control and authority are positioned in reaction to a threat. By choosing threats from various sources (domestic, external, or both), I can see whether the alliance response changes based on the kind of threat, and whether certain threats are viewed as more appropriate for the alliance to engage with than others. Finally, by examining a range of affected states, this ensures my study captures a full range of behavioral patterns across members, both large and small.

The instances I selected for closer examination include domestic unrest in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, which took on ethnic dimensions and raised fears of an Uzbek incursion into the south; domestic protests which threatened to topple the government in Belarus in 2020; the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, specifically in the time period 2020-2023; mass protests and a claimed coup attempt in Kazakhstan in 2022 which led to CSTO deployment; and the instance of Ukrainian forces seizing Russian territory in Kursk and Belgorod in 2024 in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Two instances involve foreign incursions across borders (Armenia and Russia), two involve domestic unrest (Belarus and Kazakhstan), and one involves both foreign and domestic elements (Kyrgyzstan). These can be seen as a representative set of high-profile instances of alliance action or inaction, and provide ample context in which to observe the alliance react to challenges to members' sovereignty. The resulting decisions about where to situate appropriate control and authority will illuminate how sovereignty is understood within the alliance, and how members define the CSTO's purpose as a security instrument.

In selecting these five instances, I accordingly did not select other instances of conflict which have involved CSTO member states. These include periodic border disputes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, including in 2021 and 2022, which were rejected due to the relatively small scale and contained nature of the disagreement. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has a far longer history than merely the events in 2020-2023, but because of the largely "frozen" nature of the conflict in the years prior to my selected period, I opted to focus only on the time frame which saw dramatic changes to the situation. Finally, the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 and Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014 likely constitute the most significant conflicts involving a CSTO member state excluded from this study. I decided these events would not be helpful

because they did not involve any threat to Russia's sovereignty. The instance involving Russia I did select, the seizure of Kursk and Belgorod by Ukrainian troops, violated Russia's internationally recognized borders, a clear challenge to Westphalian sovereignty.

Overall, my five instances within the case of the CSTO will serve as my guide for analyzing how the alliance understands sovereignty (where it belongs, how is it threatened) and, as such, how alliance members view the CSTO as an instrument appropriate for the defense of their security.

2.3 Method of Analysis and Empirical Sources

To study how the CSTO understands sovereignty, I rely on frame analysis as my method. Frame analysis is a form of discourse analysis that exists in a wide range of scholarly fields, including communication and media studies (Entman, 1993), political science (Chong and Druckman, 2007), and decision-making (Tversky & Kahneman, 1986), among others. Although each discipline has emphasized different features of framing analysis, its most basic form argues that any idea "can be understood in different ways," called frames (van Hulst, et al., 2025, p. 79). Framing, as defined rather abstractly by Schön and Rein (1994), is the "underlying structures of belief, perception, and appreciation" (p. 23) while Entman's (1993) definition is more specific. He describes it as the process of "select[ing] some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text" (p. 52). The result of this increased salience is the emphasis on a "particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (p. 52). This results in the frame becoming a "definition" for the idea or information (van Hulst, et al., 2025, p. 79).

Framing has two components: the cue and the frame. The cue is a piece of knowledge that the frame is "hung" on. When the cue comes from a social source – that is, when its origin is in the manmade realm rather than the natural, which lies outside human control – there is the assumption that "the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence" was involved in the events (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). In order to make sense of the cue, "social frameworks of understanding" (p. 21) are applied to interpret and render meaning. The process of framing establishes a relationship between the cue and the frame, such that the result creates "particular understandings and rul[es] out others" (van Hulst, et al., 2025, p. 80). It is a process which involves drawing boundaries between what is excluded or included in a particular frame (van

Hulst, et al., 2025) and emphasizing certain aspects of the frame to make the audience more likely to notice and remember certain aspects of information, what Entman (1993) defines as “salience” (p. 52). Equally important in evaluating frames is not only what information is included within a frame, but which is left out. Therefore, what a frame excludes can be just as important as what a frame includes.

In my case, the conflict scenarios in my five moments of observation serve as the social cues on which the CSTO hangs particular frames of meaning, including sovereignty. As an alliance, it frames itself as existing to ensure the “security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity” (ODKB, 2012) of its members; how it reacts to conflict which challenges a member-state's control over its external borders or internal grip on power reveals where the alliance accepts or rejects certain interpretations of the sovereignty norm. By framing its responses to conflict, the alliance separates legitimate challenges to sovereignty from illegitimate challenges – revealing what, exactly, it considers constituting a threat to sovereignty and where the authority to respond is situated. In so doing, it builds frames about itself as an alliance and its role, particularly in which situations it is considered appropriate to respond (and, furthermore, the appropriate means of response).

As Stone (1997) argues, framing can easily translate to ambiguity, since we often deal not with a single cue and single frame, but rather multiple cues linked to a frame, or multiple frames tied to a cue. This contrasts with how Schön and Rein (1994) view the role of framing, which strips an uncertain situation of its complexity through the process of applying a frame. If the frame relies on culturally familiar patterns of metaphor and interests, then clarity can be gained and a path of acceptable action appears. Entman (1993) argues that there are four main uses for framing – “defining problems”, “diagnosing causes,” “making moral judgments,” and “suggesting remedies” – and four locations in communication: “the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture” (p. 52). Frames often manifest in repeated phrases, keywords, or stereotypes and Entman goes so far as to define culture as the “stock of commonly invoked frames” (p. 53) within a social group. My analysis uncovers a “stock” of phrases repeatedly used by the CSTO to describe its role, justify decisions, express control, and locate authority; by examining these frames, the alliance’s culture of sovereignty is revealed.

Specifically within the field of politics, Schön and Rein (1994) argue that frames cannot be viewed as “free-floating” but rather “grounded in the institutions that sponsor them” (p. 29). Indeed, framing is particularly useful in contexts of “advocacy, mobilization, or public policy” (Creed, Langstraat, & Scully, 2002, p. 38) because of the way framing allows the communicator to imbue a cue with a culturally familiar lens that prompts interpretation and action. Once a term has been framed and meaning applied, it can be utilized in normative contexts whereby users will move from what *is* to what *should be* (van Hulst, et al., 2025). Counter-framing can also occur, as political opponents apply alternate frames to a cue to strategically influence decision making (van Hulst, et al., 2025). The applicability of this form of analysis to media studies and decision making is clear, but I argue that it is also appropriate for analyzing the boundaries of a regional norm. Because of the link that framing provides between a passive state and a state of action, understanding which frames spark which action allows a scaffolding of meaning to be constructed which defines responses to a threat such that a particular line of action is prompted. These answers delimit the boundaries of what constitutes an acceptable (or unacceptable) source of threat, i.e. a challenge to sovereignty, which allows for a reconstruction of the concept of sovereignty itself.

In relying on Krasner’s (2009) conceptualization that control and authority constitute the foundational elements of sovereignty, in applying framing analysis to my selected texts, I search for descriptions which frame control (who or what is positioned as the source of control, what is the framed threshold at which control is lost, under what conditions may control be exercised legitimately by the alliance) and frame authority (how is authority acquired, who is permitted to possess authority, under what conditions is authority challenged and by whom). These frames permit me to locate the regionalized conception of sovereignty and, additionally, to evaluate how the alliance frames its role as a protector against threats to sovereignty, *as regionally understood*. As such, framing – as it defines and describes what *is* – primes its subject for an appropriate response (what *ought to be*), making it an effective method to both examine how it interprets threat cues and how the alliance is understood to be an appropriate security mechanism.

Creed, Langstraat, and Scully (2002) present the goal of framing analysis as “understanding how certain idea elements are linked together into packages of meaning ... and deployed in situated discursive activity” (p. 37). However, even research is “situated discursive

activity” and one of the biggest challenges with using framing analysis is the issue of relativism. Since there is no frame-neutral position with which to “describe, judge, or reframe” (Schön & Rein, 1994, p. 38), the analyst must be aware of their own framework they bring to their interpretation. In this sense, the scholar is an ingrained part of the process. Some scholars, such as Matthes and Kohring (2008), have utilized a mixed method that combines quantitative coding and qualitative close reading in an attempt to minimize researcher bias. However, quantitative coding has been noted to place equal value on all negative or positive cues in a text, which results in conclusions drawn from the numerically dominant narrative rather than taking into account the salience of specific frames within their cultural context (Entman, 1993). In order to avoid this potential pitfall, I rely on purely close reading to perform my framing analysis. My own positionality as existing outside the cultural and political context of Russian and Central Asian narratives will likely act as a boon in this case because I can identify assumptions implicit in the act of framing more easily. Equally, my culturally external position may also hinder full comprehension of the salience of specific terms since I do not live among the primary audience for whom these frames are constructed.

The empirical materials I draw on primarily come from the archive of publicly available documents and the alliance’s officially-published news feed available on their website in Russian: <https://odkb-csto.org/>. I performed a comprehensive analysis of items related to each of my five observances, gathered according to mention of the affected state within the relevant time period (plus/minus one year from the conflict). Additional items not related to the five observances were also analyzed and were gathered from the time frame of 2019-2026 and selected on the basis of containing mention of threats and threat perceptions, sovereignty, descriptions of the aim and purpose of the organization, interviews with the secretary general, and declarations in reaction to global events (containing expressions of approval/disapproval). A handful of relevant items (e.g. speeches or interviews by a member head of state on topics related to conflict and sovereignty) were linked on the CSTO’s website but originated from a third party and are cited here directly from the media source rather than the CSTO website. Furthermore, documents such as the founding treaty and strategies were also included in my analysis.

My total corpus of documents was 124 items. Of that, the breakdown of the items by category is as follows:

- General, not related to a specific instance: 66
- Kyrgyzstan 2010: 8
- Belarus 2020: 3
- Armenia 2020-2023: 32
- Kazakhstan 2022: 13
- Russia 2024: 3

It should be noted that some items contained mention of multiple events (e.g., an interview in which both Nagorno-Karabakh and the events in Belarus were discussed). I used the dominant topic of the document to determine its category. Additionally, many items contain repeated information such that no new frames are provided. For that reason, not all 124 documents are cited in this thesis, although all framing found within this corpus is represented in my analysis.

3. Chapter Three: CSTO Activity in Eurasia (2010-2024) as a Reflection of Regional Conceptions of Sovereignty

This chapter includes a presentation of the findings of my empirical analysis. Each section begins with a factual introduction of the relevant context before turning to the analysis of my empirical materials. I start with a general section on the alliance, including an overview of the alliance's history, before examining sovereignty discourse within the CSTO at large. Thereafter, I turn to the five instances of member-state challenges to sovereignty and finish with an analysis examining the broad takeaways of my findings.

3.1 Regional Differentiation through a Region-Specific Interpretation of a Primary Institution: CSTO Discourse on Sovereignty

In May 1992, just months after the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Collective Security Treaty (CST) was signed in Tashkent as an initiative of the CIS. The CST was intended to be a military alliance with security guarantees to its member states, which were navigating how to manage post-Soviet logistics of soldiers, military bases, equipment, and nuclear weapons previously coordinated centrally in Moscow. Signatories to the 1992 CST included Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. In 1993, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Belarus indicated their interest in joining, and in 1994 the treaty was ratified. The original agreement was valid for a period of five years and in 1999 Uzbekistan, Georgia, and Azerbaijan chose not to renew their membership (Baev, 2008).

At a CIS summit in 2002, the agreement was amended to raise the status of the CST to be an official international organization rather than exist under the purview of the CIS. Its name was modified to become the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and it gained recognition status by the UN in 2003. Officially, its three goals are to “strengthen peace; international and regional security and stability; and protection of the independence, territorial integrity, and sovereignty of its member states on a collective basis” (Organizatsiya dogovora o kollektivnoy bezopasnosti, n.d.). The framework was expanded to include “the formation of a rapid-reaction force, the establishment of a common air defense system, and the coordination of foreign, security, and defense policies” (Gvosdev and Marsh, 2014, p. 184). During these early years the Kremlin floated the idea that the CSTO could partner with NATO, although this never occurred (Gvosdev and Marsh, 2014).

In 2006, Uzbekistan re-joined the CSTO; this occurred shortly after its crackdown on protestors in Andijan, which was heavily criticized by Western countries, including the United States which operated an air force base in Uzbekistan at the time. Uzbekistan's rejoining of the CSTO coincided with its exit from GUAM (Georgia, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova), one of the only post-Soviet organizations which did not include Russia. However, Uzbekistan's concerns for its sovereignty caused it to repeatedly block multiple CSTO initiatives, including the posting of Russian troops in Uzbekistan, the establishment of a CSTO base in Kyrgyzstan close to Uzbekistan's border, and initiatives that would have permitted foreign troops to operate on a member state's territory (Gvosdev and Marsh, 2014). Almost immediately after Uzbekistan rescinded its membership in 2012, the grouping voted to give Russia the power to veto the development of military bases by non-CSTO members in member states (Gvosdev and Marsh, 2014).

Aside from Uzbekistan's temporary status, membership has been largely steady since the CSTO emerged in its current form in 2002. The only other "wrinkle" has been the recent freezing of Armenia's participation in the CSTO following a lack of support in the face of Azerbaijan's military campaigns in Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenian PM Pashinyan stated in 2024 he intends to officially withdraw from the CSTO, although this has yet to occur (Kaleji, 2024). Nevertheless, Armenia has closed off the country to Russian border troops stationed there, no longer participates in the CSTO's operational administration, and has not paid its membership dues (Roubanis, 2025).

There is also the question of additional states with partner or observer status, categories legally voted into existence in 2021, yet which are not officially published on their websites (ODKB, 2021a). Despite this, it appears that certain additional states have had *de facto* observer status at various points in the alliance's existence. Ukraine partnered with the CSTO in certain spheres, particularly in drug trafficking, during the early 2010s (ODKB, 2009; ODKB, 2010c). Serbia appears to have participated in joint training events (ODKB, 2020e), while Serbia, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, and Cuba have had contact at the parliamentary levels with the CSTO (ODKB, 2020b; ODKB, 2020a). During a joint council meeting in 2021, screenshots show that attendees included Li Zhanshu, the Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China, Milovan Drecun, a member of the National Assembly

(parliament) of Serbia, and a representative from the Cuban embassy in Russia (ODKB, 2021s). Secretary-General Stanislav Zas mentioned that Uzbekistan, despite no longer being a member, occasionally participates in certain activities and is mentioned as being a welcome partner (ODKB, 2021i; ODKB, 2020b). In 2020, it was mentioned that the CSTO intended to extend observer status to the CIS, OSCE, and the SCO (Belta.by, 2020).

Practically speaking, the CSTO operates as a forum for joint military activities. In 2009, the Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF) was created, which all members contribute towards and which can be deployed in reaction to state or non-state aggression, emergencies, or disasters (Gvosdev and Marsh, 2014). CRRF participates in annual exercises, while a Russian base in Kyrgyzstan is assigned to provide air support to CRRF. In 2020, CRRF reportedly had about 20,000 troops (ODKB, 2020d). In 2011, the CSTO amended its official charter to include “unconstitutional disturbances” as a category of threat to which CSTO forces could be deployed against (Gvosdev and Marsh, 2014, p. 184). Members are permitted to purchase military equipment from Russia at Russian domestic prices rather than typical international prices and Russian troops share experience and training in modern warfare (learned from Syria and Ukraine) with other member states (ODKB, 2019; Otchet General’nogo sekretarya ODKB, 2025).

Additionally, the CSTO has created a network of entities under its umbrella which facilitate contact between almost every level of government of its member states, including between parliaments, police, security agencies (presumably also intelligence agencies; the FSB is frequently listed in entities involved in training exercises), media, universities, and more. They have signed a number of agreements which outline the financial and logistical terms by which troops and equipment can transverse across member states, including an agreement on cooperation of military tribunals and military investigations when involving a soldier serving in CSTO troops (ODKB, 2021j). Such cooperation also extends to the military-industrial complex, which receives significant attention in CSTO documents as an area requiring “integration” (ODKB, 2021i). “Youth Schools,” a project since 2017, have worked as a soft-power instrument for the CSTO and involved members of states outside of the alliance, including Serbia, Mongolia, and Vietnam (ODKB, 2021n). Additionally, the CSTO has a mechanism for allowing a limited number of member-state students train at reduced tuition rates at universities associated

with the Russian ministries of defense, internal affairs, emergency situations, and the FSB (ODKB, 2020b). Since 2020, the CSTO Parliamentary Assembly has operated as election observers in each other's domestic elections (ODKB, 2020a).

Pivoting to how the CSTO as an institutional entity views sovereignty, one of the first repeated phrases to note is how it refers to itself: “the zone of responsibility” (ODKB, 2024e; ODKB, 2023b; ODKB, 2021m). This phrase delimits *where* action is permissive and suggests a hierarchical structuring of authority: an area where action is permitted and an area where it is not. *Who* has responsibility *over* what or whom? Implicit in the word “responsibility” is the idea of legal liability, and therefore a certain amount of legitimacy. This legitimacy is essential to provide an appropriate foundation for action. “Zone,” on the other hand, is a term which at once implies a physical space that separates those with permission to enter from those that do not and suggests areas of applicability which are not strictly territorial. The vagueness of the term permits flexibility of interpretation and therefore allows it to be applied to varied contexts. Nevertheless, in the “zone of responsibility” echoes familiar notions of sovereignty – a legitimate actor operating in a hierarchically organized space where permission is required to act.

Throughout the CSTO's statements and publications, Afghanistan being the primary exception, it lists threats primarily made up of non-state actors. The most common items mentioned are extremism, terrorism, drug and weapons trafficking, illegal migration, and recruitment of citizens by terrorist organizations (ODKB, 2024b; ODKB, 2024f; ODKB, 2022d; ODKB, 2021n). In its report of activities from 2023-2025, “the dissemination of radical ideas, subversive literature, weapons and manuals for terrorist attacks” plus “information campaigns” from third states which specifically question the “historical commonality of CSTO” members are additionally listed as threats (Otchet General'nogo sekretarya ODKB, 2025, p. 23). Extremism is elsewhere defined as stemming from religious radicalism, race-based xenophobia, or Nazi ideology, all of which are claimed to originate from media-based information sources and whose main target is young people (ODKB, 2024f).

The emphasis on non-state threats is notable for a number of reasons. Firstly, it raises the question of whether state-based threats even fall into the “zone of responsibility” for the CSTO. Secondly, by emphasizing threats which are cross- and trans-border phenomena, it sets the stage for the constructed logic of the solution, which requires equally cross-border responses.

However, by excluding state-based actors as sources of threat from the organization, it also permits member states to pursue foreign policy with a certain amount of freedom. If enemy states were explicitly named by the CSTO, it would likely struggle to find necessary consensus considering members like Kazakhstan proudly conduct a “multi-vector” foreign policy that simultaneously courts Russia, China, and the US. This emphasis on non-state actors challenges Western conceptions of what it means to exist as a collective security alliance and suggests this point is a major differentiator in the Eurasian conception of what alliances exist to achieve.

The framing of its “zone of responsibility” to include almost exclusively non-state actors as threats also implies that for the alliance to uniformly identify and choose to respond to a threat, it must be framed in familiar non-state actor terms. In fact, a good example may be the CSTO’s most obvious exception to the non-state rule: Afghanistan. Tajikistan’s neighbor is consistently portrayed as a source of threats, yet these threats are typically framed in non-state terms: as a hotbed of religious extremism ready to spill over, as a source of drugs, and as a source of terrorism (Otchet General’nogo sekretarya ODKB, 2025; ODKB, 2021n; ODKB, 2010d). This framing downplays its status as a nation-state operating on equal status with CSTO states and repositions it as a source of “acceptable” threats which prime it to be an appropriate target for CSTO attention and action. No other state has yet to receive this treatment and indeed, no other state has been able to rally the consensus needed for a CSTO response, including Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine. None of these states’ challenges to CSTO members’ sovereignty were framed as non-state actors to the extent necessary to result in action. Arguably, even Afghanistan’s framing has not primed it for a joint military response by the CSTO, although it’s clear that much of its information-sharing and anti-terrorist activities are focused on managing the Afghan-Tajik border. A shift in this perception of Afghanistan may be underway; the Afghan Chargé d’Affaires to Russia attended a CSTO Secretariat meeting for the first time in 2023 (ODKB, 2023a). Additionally, the CSTO is pushing for its peacekeeping force to be recognized and used for UN peacekeeping missions (Otchet General’nogo sekretarya ODKB, 2025). Were that project to manifest, a logical starting point of interest for the CSTO would be missions in Afghanistan. Both of these signals indicate that the organization’s perception of Afghanistan may be shifting from a source of non-state-actor threats and towards one of a neighboring nation-state to be “managed.” If this occurs, however, the CSTO will likely need to significantly reframe its discourse on Afghanistan.

The “zone of responsibility” is also presented as transcending the physical realm to include the values held by citizens of member states and the information they can access. This is a distinctly psychological formulation of the concept of defense. The CSTO does not merely exist to secure the physical safety of its respective populations; it exists to guard particular moral and knowledge-based social structures. “Social engineering” by unwanted actors is considered a serious concern (CSTO, 2024f) and “Western-imposed liberal values” are blamed for reducing state sovereignty (CSTO, 2024g). Once again, “Western values” are not framed as a threat stemming from a specific nation-state; it is a cross-border phenomenon with murky geographical origins that remains poorly defined. Importantly, in linking “Western values” with the erosion of sovereignty, its relationship to the CSTO can be delimited. Since this is a threat with an effect on the state (sovereignty), it requires an entity whose responsibility it is to protect the state. Its portrayal in vague, cross-border terms actually provides the CSTO with more utility than if it were defined and linked to specific state(s). Vagueness means that this (non-state actor) threat falls within the “zone of responsibility” of the CSTO.

Notably, it is along this values/morals/knowledge axis of societal defense that definitions of extremism are measured by. The further an individual or group of actors deviates from the acceptable spectrum of beliefs and behaviors, the quicker he or she can be labeled an extremist, priming them for the application of the label of “threat.” If the ultimate “root” of extremism is information-based environments, then this adds media and information spheres as essential parts of the CSTO’s mandate (ODKB, 2024f). Furthermore, if “youth” are the main target of information-based influence campaigns, this also makes child and education policy relevant to the auspices of the CSTO. The “zone of responsibility” is expansive and neither geographically nor politically definite.

Analysts associated with and published directly by the CSTO on their website are aware that their Western counterparts consider the organization to be “soft” and therefore “vulnerable” (Kharitonova, 2024). However, they frame the lack of “bloc discipline” as an intentional feature which permits the sovereignty of member states to be respected, because it permits independent foreign policy decision making (Kharitonova, 2024; ODKB, 2024c). Sovereignty, then, is positioned as the ability to make choices. In this sense, the CSTO is not an alliance whose value lies in *protection from* enemies, but in its *freedom to* pursue desired policies without being held

back by alliance members. General Secretary of the CSTO, Imangali Tasmagambetov, additionally suggested that “sovereignty is acquiring additional value” in a world that is quickly shifting and that sovereignty is a “key criteria for an effective alliance” (ODKB, 2024c). If sovereignty is defined as *freedom to* in this context, then Tasmagambetov’s comments link the alliance’s effectiveness at fulfilling its mandate with the permissiveness for member states to disagree and pursue policies that may be at odds with one another. This is certainly visible in, for example, the fact that no CSTO member has acknowledged Crimea as a legal part of the Russian Federation, something that is openly mentioned by Kharitonova (2024) and not framed as a problem that hinders alliance operations.

This is perhaps one of the thorniest contradictions to tease out among CSTO framing. On the one hand, there is a clear preference for consensus and stability. A frequently repeated phrase is that the alliance aims to “harmonize” member states’ policies (Vyatchanin, 2022; ODKB, 2021s), and its institutional structure is based on unanimous consensus to make decisions, including on the use of CSTO troops. In unusually frank comments, Lukashenka, representing Belarus’ then position as chair of the CSTO’s rotating Collective Security Council, suggested that the alliance’s inability to agree on how to address conflicts was a “problem” (ODKB, 2023b). He specifically referenced the border conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh in Armenia, referring to Armenia’s complaints about a lack of response from the CSTO as “justified” and a source of “discontent” among some members. However, he also argues that the only way to navigate global challenges is to stay unified, returning to the common refrain which is presented as a catch-all solution to problems.

The “harmonization” goals for the CSTO refer to both foreign and domestic policy. The Parliamentary Assembly, which facilitates parliament-to-parliament contact between member states, aims to “harmonize legislation” (Vyatchanin, 2022). Russian officials have made explicit mention that laws in Russia could serve as blueprints for other CSTO member states, specifically in reference to reducing “foreign influence” (CSTO, 2020h). The Parliamentary Assembly regularly publishes comparative analyses of their member states’ domestic legislation on various topics, comparing what each state does or does not contain in its legal framework. The comparison is paired with recommendations to further “harmonize” laws. While many topics have staunch military themes, there are others – such as a recent 15-page analysis on laws

pertaining to “military-patriotic upbringing” – which encourage the securitization of spheres such as education and family policy (Parlamentskaya Assambleya ODKB, 2025). The extent to which these efforts within the framework of the CSTO actually translate into changed domestic legislation is beyond the scope of this work, but merits further investigation. The bigger point is that by framing unity as a solution to a problem (existing in a world full of threats) the CSTO has implemented institutional frameworks to pursue the goal of legal homogeneity. Of course, this pursuit clashes with the aforementioned *freedom to* pursue one’s policy of choice and indeed, this tension sits at the heart of the CSTO’s members.

The broad inclusion of political matters into the CSTO is not surprising when hearing Secretary General Stanislav Zas frame the organization as a “military-political bloc” (ODKB, 2020b; ODKB, 2023b). By including political matters into the “zone of responsibility,” issues that otherwise seem strange for a collective security alliance to address suddenly seem perfectly reasonable. In the same vein, responses that appear entirely insufficient are justified because “political solutions” are being pursued (ODKB, 2021h). Even Zas heard the critiques of the alliance as one which (at that point) had never responded militarily to a conflict. He spun this as the ultimate sign of the alliance’s success, arguing that if it had to respond militarily, it would be a sign that they failed in their mandate to ensure peace and security (ODKB, 2020g). Stability is heralded as the measure of an effective alliance and the CSTO’s “zone of responsibility” is contrasted with other regions of the world as being more stable, implying that the CSTO’s methods are more effective (ODKB, 2020b). If sovereignty is about ensuring one’s security, then by Zas’s framing, they should feel reassured, not concerned, by the lack of military response.

The CSTO’s broader discursive landscape reveals an organization that has constructed a regionally distinct conception of sovereignty shaped by two competing impulses: the desire for member-state autonomy and the pursuit of collective unity. By consistently framing threats in non-state actor terms, positioning itself as a “military-political” entity, and defining its “zone of responsibility” to encompass both physical and ideological space, the alliance has developed an expansive yet carefully bounded understanding of what sovereignty means and what threatens it. This framing both describes the alliance’s self-perception and actively delimits which situations can be recognized as legitimate crises and which responses are considered appropriate. The emphasis on “political-diplomatic” solutions over military action reflects an institutional logic in

which stability and predictability are themselves markers of successful sovereignty protection. Understanding this broader discursive foundation is essential context for reading the five specific instances examined below, each of which demonstrates how these frames are applied and tested in practice.

3.2 Kyrgyzstan 2010: No Legitimacy without Authority

Widespread economic challenges in 2009 and 2010 precipitated the ousting of Kyrgyz President Bakiev on April 7, 2010. The interim government consisted of opposition leaders which declared a state of emergency and disbanded the parliament and Constitutional Court out of fear that Bakiev's party would attempt to re-consolidate power (Gullette and Heathershaw, 2015). Unrest spread throughout the country, beginning in the north and spreading south by May and June. In the south, where the population is both economically poorer and has higher levels of ethnic Uzbeks, the political protests took on a distinct ethnic nature and became increasingly violent. The interim government partnered with an Uzbek diaspora leader in southern Kyrgyzstan, Kadyrjan Batyrov, to prevent Bakiev from regaining a hold in the south. However, many Kyrgyz interpreted Batyrov's political activities as threatening their sovereignty and drew parallels to Kosovo, fearing that he advocated for an Uzbek successionist movement (Gullette and Heathershaw, 2015). Over 400,000 people in Kyrgyzstan were displaced, many of them ethnic Uzbeks who fled to Uzbekistan. Fears existed that Uzbekistan would use the moment to seize southern Kyrgyzstan, although this did not ultimately occur (Akiner, 2016).

The Secretary General of the CSTO, Bordyuzha, visited Bishkek on April 9 to evaluate the situation and provide a report to the CSTO security council. Months later on June 12, interim Kyrgyz President Roza Otunbayev requested a peacekeeping force to address the unrest in the south. The CSTO convened on June 14 and "reportedly decided to send equipment to Kyrgyz security forces" but rejected sending peacekeepers (Nichol, 2010, p. 1). Russia, however, evacuated Russian nationals, sent additional forces to guard its airbase in Kant, and provided a humanitarian aid grant (pp. 1, 8). Analysts have pointed out that leading up to the protests, Russia and Kyrgyzstan had somewhat strained relations due to Bakiev's decision to continuing hosting US/NATO forces at the Manas air base, and to rescind an offer for a Russian/CSTO base in preference for a Kyrgyz/US military project at the same location (Akiner, 2016; Nicol, 2010).

In terms of the CSTO's framing of the events, it quickly moved to call the situation in Kyrgyzstan as "internal" (ODKB, 2010b; ODKB, 2010g) with no reason to respond with military force, qualifying any deployment as requiring both "political justification" and approval from the CSTO Security Council (ODKB, 2010b). It is important to note that a request for CSTO troop deployment from Kyrgyzstan is not mentioned here, although Kyrgyzstan did indeed submit a request for military aid, which was later retracted (ODKB, 2010d). This is deliberate framing on behalf of CSTO officials, who otherwise frequently note the importance of a request from a head of state as essential to even consider troop deployment. The issues of consent and legitimacy are repeatedly emphasized across these five instances; without the consent of a head of state, there can be no legitimate response. The fact that a request for CSTO involvement existed and yet removed from the frame of reference suggests that other members considered the request to lack authority, thereby being too insufficient to justify acknowledgement or response. Indeed, this line of argumentation is apparent in other documents, where they argue that only a legitimate head of state can make an appeal to an international organization to request aid; because Kyrgyzstan lacks a legitimate president, they cannot make a proper request for troops (ODKB, 2010f).

Nevertheless, the CSTO had to justify their lack of military action during a time of crisis, and they did so in various ways. They rejected "external inference" (ODKB, 2010b) as a component to the events in Kyrgyzstan, further defining the conflict as purely internal and defining themselves as a body only justified to act in response to an external threat. However, this internal/external, no response/response logic is blurred in that the CSTO indeed wanted to be seen as a responsive actor. Secretary General Bordyuzha highlighted that a lack of military response did not mean the CSTO was not involved, pointing to the group from the CSTO which met in Bishkek with OSCE representatives and Kyrgyz officials as proof of its involvement. This aligns with the CSTO's self-understanding as a military-political entity. Even when it rejects direct military engagement, it consistently makes some attempt to engage politically with the situation.

However, this narrative framing is also quick to shift when it is expedient to do so. In a different document, sustained CSTO attention to Kyrgyz matters is justified because Afghan extremists are noted to be interested in exploiting the unrest to seize increased power (ODKB,

2010d). In this case, external inference is present. Yet note that a) it is not Uzbek presence, which was one of the primary issues related to the conflict, b) that they are not merely Afghans, but Afghan extremists, aligning the rhetoric with descriptors of non-state actors, and c) their presence still does not justify sending military troops into Kyrgyzstan, it only legitimizes further political involvement. What is perhaps most important across these contradictory narratives is the lack of Uzbek involvement in either frame. They are neither explicitly referenced as part of the “internal” unrest nor are they defined as “external” threats. Of course, at this point, Uzbekistan still retained CSTO membership. At the very least, the silence on the matter suggests that Uzbekistan was not considered part of the threat structure that demanded a response, whether political or military.

Additionally, the events in Kyrgyzstan were framed as expected, and therefore not a surprise. Bordyuzha noted that the alliance had been watching political developments in Kyrgyzstan for some time and “predicted its escalation” (ODKB, 2010a). This ties into the discourse around stability. Unexpected and unpredictable developments are typically quick to be seen as threats, whereas events which can be foreseen can be addressed with political tools (ODKB, 2021d; ODKB, 2020g). Furthermore, claims to unanimity frame decision-making as legitimate, even when Kyrgyzstan had no representative at a meeting in Moscow (Bakiev was in Minsk, under Lukashenka’s protection, while the Kyrgyz government operated under interim structures), when heads of state “unanimously” decided that military aid was not needed for “Kyrgyzstan’s domestic political problems” (ODKB, 2010d). Unanimity is permitted to be relative in this case, considering that if a Kyrgyz representative had been at the meeting, the vote almost certainly would not have been unanimous. That notwithstanding, the decision by all other heads of state is still portrayed as legitimate due to its “unity.”

This occurred again in June 2010, when the CSTO’s Parliamentary Assembly (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Tajikistan) held a closed-door meeting about Kyrgyzstan without any Kyrgyz representatives present (ODKB, 2010e). The justification, although unexpressed, was likely that because the Kyrgyz parliament had been dissolved, no legitimate delegates were available to attend. Nevertheless, the failure for any Kyrgyz representative from the interim government to be invited signals a lack of agency bestowed to Kyrgyzstan, even as attendees reported concern about the lack of democratic processes in Kyrgyzstan and one

recommended a Chechnya-style referendum as a solution (ODKB, 2010e). In a July interview, Russia's ambassador to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, was asked to comment on the CSTO's response to the events in Kyrgyzstan, and he argued that only Kyrgyz security forces should interact with protestors. Otherwise, the Kyrgyz might think that "someone will come in and solve their problems" for them (ODKB, 2010g). He also commented that it was "political reasons" that kept the CSTO in an "external perimeter" position rather than becoming involved in events inside its borders. This may have been a nod to Uzbekistan's position in the alliance, or meant to imply that alliance members could not agree on what kind of military aid should be provided. In either case, the "political" reasons were sufficient to stymie a military response.

However, it did not prevent the CSTO from sending advisors from member law enforcement agencies to help investigate the source(s) of the unrest and avoid more mass violence (ODKB, 2010h). These may or may not be the "Russian specialists in the prevention of mass unrest" which had been discussed during a June meeting, this time with a Kyrgyz representative present (ODKB, 2010f). The decision to send law enforcement agents indicates that the alliance effectively facilitates the movement of institutional resources. Furthermore, the fact that actions which *are* taken are so frequently minimized in comparison to the rhetoric that the CSTO does not deploy military resources suggests that the alliance finds it useful to remain relatively quiet about its capabilities and achievements.

The events in Kyrgyzstan illuminate how the CSTO's conception of sovereignty is inseparable from questions of legitimate authority. For the alliance to recognize a threat as actionable, a recognized head of state must be present to issue a valid request and without that anchor of legitimate authority, even a genuine crisis within a member state's borders falls outside the alliance's effective mandate. The CSTO's framing of the unrest as "internal," its erasure of Kyrgyzstan's request for aid from the public record, and its invocation of Afghan extremists to justify political engagement without military commitment reveal an organization carefully managing the boundaries of its own obligations. Notably, the silence around Uzbekistan's role, despite its membership and its proximity to the conflict, suggests an additional constraint: post-Soviet states are not frameable as threats within the CSTO's conceptual vocabulary. Together, these dynamics indicate that the alliance's purpose is not simply to respond to conflict, but to

respond to conflict in ways that preserve the sovereign legitimacy of the requesting state and the consensual unity of the alliance itself.

3.3 Belarus 2020: Shared Sovereignty by Invitation Only

In the leadup to Belarus' August 2020 presidential elections, Lukashenka's government arrested multiple opposition figures, including Siarhei Tsikhanouski, to prevent them from running for office. Tsikhanouski's wife Svetlana registered in her husband's place and attracted the campaign managers of other opposition parties whose candidates had been banned, effectively creating a unified opposition (Stykow, 2023). On August 9, Lukashenka announced election results widely considered fraudulent, which prompted mass demonstrations around the country for the next seven months and a violent crackdown by the state. Estimates suggest that between 15-20% of Belarus' adult population participated in at least one demonstration; similarities have been drawn with Ukraine's Maidan Revolution due to the widespread use of social media and the extent of citizen participation after the first wave of police violence (Stykow, 2023, pp. 812, 815). It should also be noted that Belarus has seen mass protests after most elections since 1996, when the so-called "Minsk Spring" occurred as Lukashenka increased the political powers afforded to the executive office (Hansen & Ford, 2023). The 2020 protests consisted of high levels of young students willing to risk their lives (Buzgalin & Kolganov, 2021) mixing with additional portions of the population previously less willing to protest (women, those with high levels of education) as they expressed discontent with the elections, Belarus' mismanagement of COVID-19, and the reduction of state-provided social benefits (Hansen & Ford, 2023; Kazharski, 2021). Interestingly, there was a distinct lack of ideological binary around "choice" between Russia or Europe found in protestor discourse, instead emphasizing ethical demands for an end to state violence and for free elections (Kazharski, 2021).

Lukashenka, in an attempt to appease discontent, promised constitutional reform which occurred two years later. In February 2022, constitutional amendments passed which reinstated presidential term limits (two five-year terms) but which would "reset" Lukashenka's time in office, permitting him to theoretically remain president until 2035 (Stykow, 2023). Throughout the protests in 2020, Russia provided support. On September 14, 2020, Putin shared that \$1.5 billion in economic aid would be provided to Belarus. Russia also provided journalists and reporters to fill positions as Belarusian journalists resigned en masse from state-run media

companies (Leukavets, 2022). This resulted in no disruption to the broadcasting of state-aligned narratives. Reportedly, Putin offered Lukashenka support within the framework of either the Customs Union or the CSTO, although neither of these organizations ultimately provided assistance (TASS, 2022).

The instance of Belarus has several similarities to the Kyrgyzstan instance. In an interview, Secretary General Zas addressed the “domestic political crisis” in Belarus, framing it as an internal matter which fell outside the scope of the CSTO’s mandate (ODKB, 2021a). He argued that “a solution to the domestic political crisis must be found by Belarus itself” and that the “CSTO does not intend to interfere in this process” although it is ready to help if requested (ODKB, 2021a). In this case, however, the difference is that Lukashenka did not appeal to the CSTO for assistance and therefore it lacks the foundational component for the CSTO to consider responding with military aid. Here, we can see that Lukashenka’s authority is implicitly respected as legitimate and that his lack of request is neither questioned nor challenged.

In contrast to the Kyrgyzstan case, the CSTO framed the events in Belarus as having an external origin. They are described as “a combined attack ... aimed at overthrowing the legitimate government, using virtually every tool at its disposal: psychological and economic sanctions, and a show of military force to exert pressure on Belarus” (ODKB, 2021g). The assumed perpetrator is not named in this description, but it is clear who is meant: some shadowy combination of the West/NATO/Europe/United States. Presumably the reference to military force is a nod to NATO’s 2021 exercises in the Baltics. What stands out in this description of the West is the utter inability to codify *who* or *what* is the source of the threat. It is not presented in non-state terms; it is not named at all. The lack of identification may allow the CSTO to creep close to including it in its familiar category of non-state threats, but the fact that they fail to attach descriptors like “extremists” or “terrorists” to their depiction of the West indicates that something is holding them back from doing so. Where it might be easy to point to the military capabilities as a key indicator of the state-based nature of the perceived threat, I suggest that the sanctions (mentioned before military capabilities) are the key factor in preventing the CSTO from fully being able to frame the West as a non-state actor. Terrorists can possess military capabilities, but only states can sanction.

Despite the conflict being framed as an external threat, Belarus is not positioned as being in imminent danger of losing its sovereignty, nor is the “combined attack” presented as an attack on the CSTO as a whole – even though Article 4 states that an attack on one member is an attack on all members (ODKB, 2012). Lukashenka commented that Russia’s reaction to the protests is proof that the CSTO needs to be developed, saying that “now we probably understand what the CSTO is and why we need it” (Belta.by, 2020). While the meaning of the statement is certainly opaque, it neither dismisses the CSTO nor frames it negatively. If anything, it reaffirms the relevance of the CSTO and positions it as a worthwhile investment. If Lukashenka had been disappointed or angered by the CSTO’s lack of involvement against the protests, it is hard to imagine him framing the alliance as such.

There is evidence to suggest that in the aftermath of the protests, the CSTO responded with increased exchanges between intelligence agencies. This move is rhetorically justified as a response to an “information campaign that has been launched against some of our states to undermine stability and create a breeding ground for conflict between government structures and destructive opposition groups seeking power” (ODKB, 2021d). The CSTO also defined combating digital activity which could go “against the foundations of the constitutional order and state security” as one of their main priorities for the year and highlighted the importance of “digital sovereignty” (ODKB, 2021c). Once again, there is a preference for “political” responses rather than military responses. With that said, the CSTO also took pains to highlight that the largest military exercises in 2020 took place in Belarus – only one of two which were not cancelled due to COVID-19 (ODKB, 2021b).

Belarus in 2020 makes clear that the external origin of a threat is not, on its own, sufficient to activate the CSTO. Despite framing the crisis as a coordinated attack from undefined Western forces, language that hints at the alliance's familiar non-state threat vocabulary without fully committing to it, the absence of a formal request from Lukashenka meant the CSTO had no legitimate basis for military engagement. What the case also reveals, however, is the alliance's ability to multiply political and intelligence resources in response to perceived threats. That Lukashenka himself framed Russia's support as evidence of the CSTO's relevance rather than its failure suggests that members understand the alliance's purpose to extend well beyond troop deployment. For authoritarian regimes whose primary concern is

retaining power, access to an ecosystem of political resources may constitute the alliance's most valuable function.

3.4 Armenia 2020-2023: The Limits of the Zone of Responsibility

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has a long history, with the roots of the 2020-2023 violence stemming out of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War in the early 1990s. The Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) was part of the Azerbaijan SSR under the Soviet Union, but a movement by NKAO residents beginning in 1988 called for a referendum to join with Armenia. This was rejected by Moscow and Azerbaijani leadership; upon the collapse of the USSR, violence worsened until an armistice was reached in 1994. Armenia claimed Nagorno-Karabakh, which itself claimed status as an independent republic but failed to gain international recognition, including by Armenia. Throughout two decades of frozen conflict, mediation efforts consistently stumbled over the tension between the principles of territorial integrity and national self-determination (Landgraf & Seferian, 2024). From September to November 2020, Azerbaijan launched a full military assault and successfully captured most, but not all, of Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan's steps to modernizing its military capabilities are credited as being a crucial component of their victory: Turkey provided training, military equipment, drones, officers from its own ranks, and facilitated the provision of Syrian mercenaries, while Israel provided additional military equipment (Cheterian, 2024). Russia mediated a ceasefire and sent 2,000 peacekeepers to Nagorno-Karabakh as part of the settlement (Welt & Bowen, 2021).

In September 2023, Azerbaijan invaded the remaining portion of Nagorno-Karabakh, effectively bringing the entire region under its control. The peacekeepers did not resist Azerbaijan's incursion and on January 1, 2024, the government of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic announced the dissolution of the entity (Landgraf & Seferian, 2024). The CSTO had been Armenia's primary method of balancing against Azerbaijan and Turkey, yet the alliance failed to meaningfully respond to the loss of territory Armenia considered essential to its sense of national identity (Landgraf & Seferian, 2024, p. 18).

The CSTO Secretariat framed the July 12, 2020 violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan as a "violation of the ceasefire agreements" which negatively reduced the "normalization" of the situation (CSTO, 2020c). Here, the primary concern is stability and predictability of the conflict, not resolution. Note also that the object of the "violation" was the

agreed-upon international framework for managing the frozen conflict, not sovereignty or territorial integrity. In choosing to so depict the act, the CSTO removes itself as an immediately relevant party. If sovereignty is not violated, then the CSTO's role and appropriate response are not clear. It further distanced itself from the events by commenting that it had not received any official request for aid from Armenia, although a "message" was received by the CSTO Permanent Council (Belta.by, 2020). If true, lack of a request for aid removes responsibility for action from the CSTO and justifies no military response. However, it is also difficult to believe no official request was forthcoming considering the frequency with which Armenia raised the topic of Nagorno-Karabakh in CSTO meetings and its willingness to (potentially) suspend alliance membership over the topic.

Secretary General Zas called on Armenia and Azerbaijan to refrain from "provocative actions" (Belta.by, 2020), the phrasing of which places equal burden on both states – regardless that one is a member and one is not – and implies that if provoked, the other side has some justification, if not duty, to respond. Therefore, if "provocative actions" are at play, the burden of guilt in violating a ceasefire agreement is not as grave had there been no provocation. Armenia is not held to a higher standard than Azerbaijan due to its alliance membership, nor expected to behave differently.

Due to the lack of public transparency, it is impossible to know the intention behind many of the CSTO's decisions. However, it is worth noting that in September 2020, the CSTO hosted a two-day exercise on the deployment of assets to the Caucasus Collective Security Region. The exercise occurred in Moscow, and included the CSTO Joint Staff and Secretariat, the Council of Commanders of the Border Troops of the CIS, and several Russian agencies (including the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs and FSB) (ODKB, 2020f). The activity involved submitting proposals for the deployment of CRRF to a CSTO member state. The only comment on the conclusion of the exercise is that the skills of officers involved "were successfully improved" (ODKB, 2020f). Several aspects of this exercise stand out as different from most other CSTO training exercises: most do not include the CIS, most don't have the number and breadth of Russian agencies involved, and most last longer than two days. Indeed, the results of the exercises – that skills were improved – is far less positive language than what typically accompanies CSTO exercise reports (compare, for example, with ODKB, 2021m;

ODKB, 2021). Based on these factors, Russia may have tried to gauge whether the CSTO could be deployed to Armenia and determined that either risk factors which could escalate the conflict were too high or member states were not unified on the decision.

In an analytical piece published on the CSTO's website, Turkey's support for Azerbaijan is positioned as "unprecedented" and whose past as a non-Soviet state and NATO member is framed as a foreign, unwanted element (Miroslavovich, 2023). Turkey's participation is so significant that Miroslavovich positions this factor as the key reason 2020 was a turning point in the conflict, not the scale of Azerbaijan's gains. Similarly, in a 2021 interview, Zas expressed more concern about the presence of Syrian militants involved in the hostilities than about Armenia's claimed territory being violated (ODKB, 2021a). Despite these undesirable, "external" elements at play, Miroslavovich explains the CSTO's response as stemming from a lack of desire by "Russia nor other members of the [CSTO to] seek a clear choice between Armenia and Azerbaijan," a remarkable statement considering that Armenia heavily lobbied the CSTO to take decisive pro-Armenia action to resolve the question of Nagorno-Karabakh (Miroslavovich, 2023).

Several aspects can be seen at play here: firstly, that the material conditions of Azerbaijan seizing territory previously claimed by Armenia were overshadowed by the involvement of third parties ascribed to a category, namely that of never having belonged to the Soviet Union. Therefore, in this case, the Soviet Union became a marker of belonging and a measurement by which the significance of a conflict can be evaluated. Secondly, if other alliance members are depicted as being uninterested in "choosing" between Armenia and Azerbaijan, it suggests that post-Soviet states do not fall into the category of "external threats" which prompt action. The Soviet Union as reference point also appeared in comments made by Lukashenka, who positioned Armenia and Azerbaijan as "brothers" with whom the CSTO previously shared a state with (President of the Republic of Belarus, 2023). In so phrasing the relations between the two countries, Armenia's membership in the CSTO does not privilege it with more support or urgency than Azerbaijan's position. The two states are framed as equals, and the reference point for their equality is their former membership in the Soviet Union.

By 2021, CSTO officials described the situation in Armenia as generally "stabilized" thanks to deployment of Russian peacekeepers and again highlighted the need for resolution by

“political and diplomatic measures” (ODKB, 2021f). Only an Armenian representative to the CSTO characterized Azerbaijan’s attacks on the Syunik region as an attack on Armenia’s territorial integrity, indicating significant disparity in the way the same event (escalation in the Syunik region) was viewed within the CSTO broadly vs. Armenia (ODKB, 2021f). What Armenia viewed as a threat to its sovereignty, the CSTO saw as an indication of insufficient political measures (ODKB, 2021f). CSTO reports acknowledged that Azerbaijani forces “violated the border” and yet the only response this prompted was closer monitoring by the alliance (CSTO, 2021e). A couple months later during another bout of attacks, Zas acknowledged that they were a “threat to Armenia’s security” – although he failed to frame it as a threat to Armenia’s sovereignty (ODKB, 2021h). He justified not responding militarily because political solutions (which are “best”) had yet to be exhausted. By qualifying political solutions as ideal, Zas reassured his audience that the CSTO’s lack of military response was not a poor decision; in fact, it was the preferable, responsible response.

In an address to the Committee of Secretaries of the Security Councils of the CSTO in June 2022, Pashinyan commented on statements made in the aftermath of Azerbaijan seizing portions of Armenian-claimed territory (Prime Minister of Armenia, 2022):

I want to note the following: after the invasion of Azerbaijani forces into our territory there were some comments that there is no demarcation or delimitation of the borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Speaking honestly, this is a rather dangerous formulation, because we’re talking about the CSTO’s zone of responsibility. If we say we should heed the borders where demarcation and delimitation processes have been carried out, this could blur the understanding of the CSTO’s zone of responsibility, insofar that it raises the question of where the CSTO’s zone of responsibility begins and where the CSTO’s zone of responsibility ends.

This passage suggests that the CSTO struggles to know confidently where the borders of their organization lie. The fact that the parties to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict are states, not non-state actors, resulted in hesitation to respond with any kind of military action. “Political-diplomatic” solutions were emphasized over any other potential reaction, suggesting that responding with military force to a state actor is seen as a red line.

One of the primary “political-diplomatic” responses by the CSTO was a fact-finding mission. On September 13, 2022, at the initiation of Armenia, the CSTO Collective Security

Council sent a mission to collect facts and prepare suggestions for de-escalation efforts between Armenia and Azerbaijan, headed by the CSTO Secretary General and Chief of the Joint Staff (ODKB, 2022g). The decision to send the mission was precipitated by CSTO members expressing their desire to address the conflict only through political and diplomatic methods during a “thorough and frank exchange of views” (ODKB, 2022g). Such language likely smooths over disagreements held by member states; therefore, the decision to send a mission suggests this was the “lowest common denominator” of a response considered acceptable to all members. It appears that the results of the mission, in the form of a draft with recommendations for “joint measures to provide assistance” to Armenia, was prepared and distributed (ODKB, 2022g). However, all further mention of this report promptly disappears from public CSTO records. This case, more so than perhaps any other, exemplifies the stagnation the alliance is capable of when there is a lack of unanimous agreement on a course of action.

Armenia’s potential exit from the organization is presented as a “sovereign right” and “decision of a sovereign state” (vocabulary lacking in the framing of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict), which is not discussed as an outcome to be worried about (CSTO, 2024c; CSTO, 2024a). A potential conflict between Armenia and the CSTO is even mentioned and the reader gently reminded to keep in mind “the resource base and actual capabilities” of both sides – essentially dismissing such a scenario as practically unrealistic (CSTO, 2024c). Additionally, the general secretary notes that the CSTO has not received the required six-month written notice of retracting membership (CSTO, 2024a). Armenia has reportedly communicated that it acknowledges the validity of decisions being made “in a limited format” (i.e. technically not by full consensus) since it has ceased participation in meetings (CSTO, 2024d). The lack of unity characterized by this case has led to institutional precedent whereby decisions are acknowledged as valid, despite a member recusing themselves from voting procedures.

The Armenia case is perhaps the most revealing of the CSTO's conceptual limits, exposing the line between security and sovereignty as the alliance understands them. Azerbaijan's military campaigns were consistently framed as threats to Armenia's security rather than its sovereignty, and this distinction resulted in distinct consequences, including the exclusion of military resources as an appropriate response. The alliance's reluctance to identify where its own "zone of responsibility" begins and ends reflects a deeper institutional aversion to

adjudicating between competing territorial claims involving post-Soviet states. By framing Armenia and Azerbaijan as Soviet-era equals rather than member and adversary, and by treating Turkey's involvement as the most alarming external element rather than Azerbaijan's seizure of claimed Armenian territory, the CSTO revealed that its conception of sovereignty does not extend to disputed borders. The implication for the alliance is significant in that it clearly demonstrates that the CSTO does not exist to resolve territorial questions.

3.5 Kazakhstan 2022: Legitimized Threats and Collective Action

In early January 2022, the Kazakhstani government raised the price of Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG), causing costs to rise almost overnight. Protests broke out in western Kazakhstan and President Tokayev, newly positioned in office during a managed transition from former head of state Nazarbayev in 2019, quickly rolled back the price increases and dismissed the government (Russell, 2022). However, protests did not cease but rather expanded to Almaty, the largest city in the south, and existing oppositional groups activated to participate in protests calling for political reforms. There appear to have been two kinds of actors involved in these protests – on the one hand were peaceful protesters demanding improved economic conditions and a more responsive political apparatus, on the other were violent groups which hid their identities and engaged in looting and vandalism. Kudaibergenova and Laruelle (2022) argue that the emergence of protests was evidence of a broader breakdown of regime-society relations, caused by “a key failure of the regime built by Nazarbayev [in] its inability to reconcile its neoliberal prosperity rhetoric with citizens’ calls for a welfare state” (p. 442). The issue of LPG prices was merely the straw that broke the camel’s back, as it were.

As the size of protests increased, Tokayev issued a “shoot to kill” order to police and by January 11, over ten thousand individuals had been arrested while internet access was blocked in Almaty (Russell, 2022). In March 2022, Tokayev’s narrative shifted to blame “traitors” within Kazakhstan’s security agencies for the events of “bloody January” (Putz, 2023). A year later, in 2023, Kazakhstani security officials presented a report to parliament that framed bloody January as an attempted coup by *siloviki* insiders, prepared for over a year and utilizing criminal actors (Radio Asia, 2023). The details about who was involved and how they planned a coup without Tokayev’s knowledge remains unknown, and this narrative should be weighed critically. Nevertheless, even in the early days of the protests, some analysts noted the coordinated nature

of expanding protests and internet access blocked, and curious irregularities around which government buildings were vandalized and which not (Duvanova, 2022). The head of Kazakhstan's National Security Committee, Karim Massimov, was arrested and charged with treason, while the Minister of Defense was removed from office, and several other members of the security forces have died from alleged suicide (International Crisis Group, 2022; Radio Asia, 2023). Whatever happened, there is no doubt that a purge followed.

The decision to deploy CSTO peacekeeper troops occurred within a handful of hours of Tokayev placing the request for aid. However, the 2,500 troops sent (mostly Russian, but also including Tajik, Kyrgyz, Armenian, and Belarusian soldiers) guarded government and military-industrial property, jobs typically covered by Kazakhstani security forces (Hegglin, 2022; Kriener & Brassat, 2023). CSTO troops did not engage with protesters. Despite some initial worries that the CSTO troops would linger, they left two weeks after arrival.

CSTO officials widely lauded the “peacekeeping operation” as an overwhelming success, largely attributed to the speed at which CSTO heads of state agreed to a response and the fact that “our peacekeepers did not fire a single shot” (Vyatchanin, 2022; ODKB, 2022g). The decision to deploy the peacekeeping unit is referred to as a “political decision” (Vyatchanin, 2022), revealing the application of the frequently invoked “political-diplomatic” rhetoric typically used in crises, now shifted onto a decision in which military assets were deployed. The rhetoric surrounding the operation in Kazakhstan had to fit into a familiar frame to increase the legitimacy of the decision-making process. Whatever the realities of what assets were applied to the crisis, if acceptable responses had previously been defined in “political-diplomatic” terms, then the present situation also had to be described as a “political decision” in order to legitimize the act. This suggests that a purely military response to a crisis requires careful maneuvering to frame correctly due to the institutional emphasis on “political-diplomatic” solutions.

Secretary General Stanislav Zas legally grounded the CSTO's involvement on three principles: Articles 2 and 4 of the founding treaty, an “Agreement on Peacekeeping Activities,” and the Tokayev's request for military aid (ODKB, 2022b). The layers of justification suggest that there is a high bar for military action to receive consensual approval from all members. The founding treaty alone is insufficient; it must be paired with an invitation by the affected party and whichever assets are deployed must have an existing legal framework in which to operate.

Permission is framed as the key element on which CSTO activity can hold potential legitimacy. However, permission alone does not suffice for the CSTO to approve troop deployment, as shown in the Kyrgyzstan case. Yet the fact that Tokayev's permission receives such emphasis in this instance suggests that it is a required component for any potential action by the CSTO.

It should be noted that there are signs that consensus may not have been immediately reached in Kazakhstan's case, as is it framed in media reporting. On January 6, Zas held two meetings by telephone: one with Lukashenka and Tokayev (ODKB, 2022a), the other with Pashinyan (ODKB, 2022c). No other meetings with member states were recorded that day. Why Belarus and Armenia? Were they the last holdouts on agreeing to send aid to Kazakhstan? Could this have something to do with their own instances of conflict when the CSTO did not become involved? There can be no certain answers, but these meetings suggest that the decision to intervene in Kazakhstan's case may not have been as straightforward or unanimous as framed.

CSTO troops are credited with the prevention of a "humanitarian catastrophe" (ODKB, 2022g). The decision to send peacekeepers and to frame the results of their presence in humanitarian terms is likely linked to the CSTO's efforts to become UN-approved peacekeeping units. It also artificially magnifies the realities on the ground: guarding infrastructure is hardly glamorous work, but preventing a humanitarian catastrophe is grounds for a victory parade and medals for those who distinguished themselves – both of which occurred as the operation wound down (ODKB, 2022f). Elsewhere, Zas described the events in Kazakhstan as the result of "terrorist, extremist, and criminal" elements (ODKB, 2022e). All these terms fit well with the long-established preference for non-state actors primed as appropriate threats/crises to respond to.

In describing the withdrawal of troops, the secretary general emphasized that this was done "in accordance with the will of the Kazakh side" and within a "planned timeframe" (ODKB, 2022f). Here we see explicit deference made to the host country and their wishes, implicitly tying the legitimacy of their actions to the invitation extended by Kazakhstan. Foreign troops operating on Kazakh soil breaks the typical monopoly of violence headed by the state and presents two threats: the implication with their presence that the state is weak or that the foreign troops will overstay the invitation and challenge the state beyond the initial crisis which required

the foreign troops. Thus, the “planned timeframe” comment was crucial in reassuring Kazakh authorities that there will be no unwanted surprises.

In a meeting held via video conference on January 10, 2022, each of the heads of CSTO member states plus the secretary general gave speeches reflecting on their decision to send peacekeeping units (ODKB, 2022d). Tokayev framed the events in Kazakhstan as the most significant crisis in the country’s 30 years of independence, immediately providing his audience with his sense of scale and leaning on the collapse of the Soviet Union as a shared point of reference. The sources of the crisis included a host of non-state actors: religious radicals, criminals, bandits, looters, hooligans, armed militants, terrorists, and foreign fighters. This, however, was not a theme uniformly shared by all. Lukashenka placed significant emphasis on the “external factor” and drew comparisons to other instances of global unrest (Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya), in addition to mentioning his own country having experienced something similar. The unspoken factor is the implied involvement of the West as the instigator and funder of these “foreign elements.” However, rather than placing full blame on external actors, Lukashenko urged his fellow heads of state to recognize the “internal” factors, suggesting that was a “lesson learned” from Belarus, in a presumed reference to the 2020 protests, and warning that if others ignored the presence of “internal factors” that there was risk of a “repeat.” Putin equally placed blame on internal and external factors as the source of the “challenge to [Kazakhstan’s] security, integrity, and sovereignty” and referenced “Maidan techniques” and “color revolutions.” Tajikistan’s President Rahmon framed terrorists as having “no homeland, no religion, [and] no nationality” and Armenia’s Pashinyan expressed that he too struggled with the “emergence of foreign terrorist fighters” in the Caucasus.

Rahmon’s statement stripping terrorists of any marker of identity, particularly state-based identity, is perhaps the most explicit act of framing a stated threat as an entity which lacks all legal rights or recompense, opening up the door for actions of any scale to address the threat. Referring to the individuals as “terrorists” strips them of the acknowledgement of personhood and uses a label against which it is difficult to morally argue. Further stripping terrorists of a homeland (no belonging, no origin, no ties to “us”), religion (no belief, no moral code), and nationality (no identity, no passport, no legal rights before the state) is the ultimate non-state actor which crosses boundaries to supposedly threaten the CSTO. It is also discursively empty of

all meaning – of course, no entity exists which lacks such markers. The emptiness allows the concept to be applied to any number of individuals and situations, regardless of their relevance or connection to one another. Yet the reaction to “terrorists” has been discursively primed and defined: they are to be eradicated from society, and since they exist without legal status, the state (with or without fellow CSTO member states) has every right to eliminate them in the manner they see fit.

Finally, in positioning the dual nature of threats (internal and external) as part of a larger global pattern, it legitimizes both an external and internal orientation for the organization. It also plays into a sense of global solidarity with other “victims” of “foreign elements.” In this way, the rhetoric reinforces anti-West, anti-imperialist attitudes while simultaneously building a sense of solidarity among states which have histories of imperial control between themselves. However, this dynamic is deflected to an alternative oppressor and interventionist, who remains unnamed but implied. Similar to the discursively empty concept of “terrorist”, leaving the “West” unspoken and undefined permits the “foreign elements” to be whoever the member states want them to be. For Russia, this may mean the United States while for Tajikistan, it may mean Afghanistan. The specific source of “foreignness” is secondary to its ability to be blamed as a threat.

On the obverse side, the inclusion of internal elements in defining the origin of threats legitimates the existence of the Parliamentary Assembly and the “harmonization” of domestic legislation. If the threats are coming from inside, then the CSTO has a legitimate role to play in ensuring domestic stability. This point also differentiates it from a Western collective security alliance such as NATO, where allies may be widely stationed across borders yet do not involve themselves in domestic security functions; NATO’s threats are defined in external terms only. In Kazakhstan, CSTO troops took over the functions of Kazakhstani domestic security forces and demonstrate how the CSTO’s conception of threats stemming from external *and* internal sources blurs in practice. The external threat provides the basis for initial legitimacy in summoning the organization to a conflict, but the function the CSTO provided was that of internal security.

Kazakhstan in 2022 represents the CSTO's only successful activation of military force, and the conditions that made it possible illuminate the specific conception of sovereignty that the alliance is, in practice, designed to protect. The threshold was cleared not because Kazakhstan

faced an external military threat, but because the crisis was successfully framed in the alliance's preferred vocabulary (terrorists, extremists, foreign-trained criminal elements) and because Tokayev, as an unambiguously legitimate head of state, issued a formal request that the alliance could unanimously approve. The subsequent deployment, in which CSTO troops guarded infrastructure rather than confronting protesters, suggests that the CSTO is especially hesitant to deploy troops to situations in which they could fight against citizens of a member state. That the operation was described as a "political decision" in the context of a military deployment additionally reveals how salient the alliance's framing of legitimacy must be in order to collectively justify their decisions.

3.6 Russia 2024: Silence as Sovereignty and the Limits of Collective Obligation

Ukraine's surprise incursion into Russia's Kursk region in 2024 shocked Russian leaders. It is widely understood not to have been an attempt to seize territory long-term, but to have been a maneuver to distract Russian troops from offensives in Sumy and Kharkiv Oblasts (Evans, 2025). Russia's poorly defended border forces and Ukraine's use of asymmetrical warfare techniques led Ukraine to quick success that it defended for months before being forced to withdraw. Russia gathered a force of 78,000 (including 11,000 North Koreans) to push out about 30,000 Ukrainians (Evans, 2025). Ukraine's choice of Kursk as a target is highly symbolic, referencing not only the 1944 Battle of Kursk – which saw Soviet victory over Nazi Germany – but also the tragedy of the submarine Kursk in 2000, a PR disaster for newly elected President Putin (Harned, 2024). FSB forces orchestrated the Russian military response, deemed a “counter-terrorism operation” and 120,000 civilians were evacuated under circumstances of both regional and federal states of emergency (The Center for Eastern Studies, 2024).

The Kremlin's public reaction to the Kursk incursion was to downplay the gravity of the situation, treating it as “something akin to a natural disaster in a remote region” (Khvostunova, 2024). State-run media used terms like the “new reality” and “new normal” (referencing phrases introduced during COVID-19) to describe the events to the Russian populace (Pertsev, 2024). Putin drew similarities between the situation in Kursk and the Beslan school tragedy in the North Caucasus during a visit, insinuating that the Ukrainian occupation was terrorism (President of Russia, 2024). Sources indicate that Putin weighed a second wave of mobilization (Pertsev, 2024), suggesting that privately Ukraine's maneuver succeeded in deeply rattling the elite's

perception of their ability to retake the territory. Russia's ambassador to the US, Anatoly Antonov, called Russia's borders "sacred" while Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova emphasized the criminal nature of Ukraine's actions (quoted in The Center for Eastern Studies, 2024). While Russia may consider its borders holy, its fellow CSTO allies had little to say on the matter and were overlooked as sources of aid in favor of North Korea.

The CSTO had few comments about the "situation" in Kursk oblast as Ukrainian troops crossed the border into Russia (ODKB, 2024e). In comments provided to the press, the CSTO as an entity acknowledged that the conflict entered the "zone of responsibility." This suggests an awareness of the potential for an obligatory response. However, much more emphasized was that the CSTO could only respond if a member state requested assistance, and despite the Russians and CSTO Secretariat swapping information, no request had been forthcoming (ODKB, 2024e). Here there is a relinquishing of obligation due to certain criteria remaining unmet. The organization is unburdened of responsibility and inaction is permitted, rather than being a sign of disunity or fecklessness. The audience is reassured that the CSTO *would* do something if only the proper procedural conditions were followed. This emphasis on rule-following even in unexpected situations reveals a high value on procedure as a source of stability. Rather than a sign of weakness, the CSTO's ability to follow the rules during crisis is presented as laudable and a source of reassurance.

There is no externally visible proof that Russia has raised the topic of CSTO member states contributing to the war in Ukraine. Silence rules on the matter, with the secretary general commenting that "the question of any participation or involvement of the CSTO in the special military operation was not raised or discussed" (quoted in Plamenev, 2022). Again, this removes the burden of responsibility and obligation from the CSTO. Despite a member state being involved in a significant war with another state, the alliance is separated from it through legitimated silence. Furthermore, the issue of territory may constitute a boundary few members are willing to cross. The case of Armenia already demonstrated the difficulty for the alliance to clearly articulate where its own boundaries lie and its hesitancy to act in disputed regions. In 2021, Secretary General Zas clearly stated that CRRF forces may only be used on member-state territory and that peacekeeping forces are permitted in third states only with permission of the UN Security Council (ODKB, 2021i). Both conditions, if sincerely adhered to by even a

minority of alliance members, would significantly constrain CRRF's usefulness in Russia's war against Ukraine considering the extent to which borders have blurred. If most CSTO members do not acknowledge Russia's claim to Crimea or the four occupied Ukrainian territories, then CRRF could operate only in small portions of Kursk and Belgorod oblasts in Russia.

Similar to the case of Armenia, a flurry of additional meetings over the winter of 2021-2022 suggests that Russia weighed using CSTO in some kind of stabilization or peacekeeping capacity after seizing Ukraine, particularly under their assumption that taking Kyiv would be quick. These meetings included one between Zas and Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov (CSTO, 2021r), meetings between the CSTO and the Red Cross in Geneva (ODKB, 2021q), and a meeting of the Council of Defense Ministers discussing the "procedure for transporting personnel, weapons, and military equipment" from one member state to another (ODKB, 2021p). Furthermore, the Colbalt-2021 military exercises in Tajikistan that year were described as training for a "special operation to destroy illegal armed groups in border areas" and honing skills for "participating in a large-scale operation in conditions as close as possible to combat" (ODKB, 2021o). The training exercise for the CSTO's peacekeeping forces (titled "Indestructable Brotherhood" – admittedly a common title for exercises), held almost simultaneously in Kazan, involved the creation of a buffer zone 98 kilometers long and 32 kilometers wide, while troops practiced running checkpoints, refugee camps, escorting humanitarian aid convoys, storming a building occupied by "militants," rescuing "hostages," and providing first aid to injured civilians (ODKB, 2021m). An earlier announcement of the exercises described them as addressing the "issue of post-conflict resolution in a crisis zone" (ODKB, 2021k).

Also similar to Armenia's case, there is no certainty that these exercises had deeper intentions behind them. However, the timing and relevance to actual events is certainly noteworthy. The lack of public indication that exercises may be tests for actual deployment of forces is exemplary of a broader pattern of silence, permitting plausible deniability that anything other than routine military exercises occur, and shields disagreement between member states from public awareness. The framing of exercises as pre-planned, innocently intentioned, and training against non-state actors reinforces the entity's preference for predictability and

distinguishes itself from Russia's pattern of behavior, which is more accepting of risk and unpredictability.

However, for a “political-military” alliance, it would be remiss to only focus on the latter half of that self-descriptor. In the months leading up to the full-scale invasion, CSTO rhetoric mimicked Russian narratives as Zas described concern at NATO and US forces gathering “near the CSTO’s western borders” (ODKB, 2021s), despite a statement less than two years prior that “there is no immediate threat of a military conflict with NATO” (ODKB, 2020b). Nevertheless, in late 2021, the Chairman of the CSTO’s Parliamentary Assembly was unanimously reelected for another term: Vyacheslav Volodin, the Chairman of the Russian State Duma, former Deputy Prime Minister of Russia, and a member of Putin’s elite circle. Zas used the perceived threat from NATO as a frame to push for “the parliamentary dimension” of the alliance’s work, specifically the “harmonization” of domestic legislation (ODKB, 2021s). In this sense, the CSTO has not been able to distance itself politically from the rhetoric or the hyper-conservative turn made by Putin since the invasion of Ukraine, indicating that the alliance’s strongest member does indeed have outsized impact on the orientation of the alliance. Political activity appears to have a much lower threshold for agreement than use of military force – perhaps not an unsurprising conclusion, but certainly one which has significant impact on how members have come to view and utilize the CSTO’s structures.

Russia's experience in Kursk brings the CSTO's sovereignty logic full circle, demonstrating that even the alliance's most powerful member is subject to the same procedural constraints that governed inaction in every previous instance. The acknowledgment that the situation fell within the "zone of responsibility" was notable precisely because it was immediately neutralized by the absence of a formal request. That absence, rather than being treated as a failure, was presented as evidence of the alliance functioning correctly. The parallels with Armenia are instructive: in both cases, a member state faced what appeared to be a clear challenge to its Westphalian sovereignty, and in both cases the alliance found grounds to remain inactive as a defense mechanism for the other member states. What distinguishes the Russian case is the additional complexity introduced by the contested nature of the borders in question: if most CSTO members do not recognize Russia's claims to occupied Ukrainian territory, the legal geography within which the alliance could even theoretically operate becomes quite narrow.

Taken together, this case reinforces that the CSTO's conception of sovereignty prioritizes procedural legitimacy and consensual decision-making above all else and that this structure, far from being a dysfunction, reflects the smaller member states' most reliable mechanism for preserving their own sovereign agency within an alliance dominated by a more powerful partner.

3.7 Discussion of Findings

To better analyze the five instances I examined and evaluate them within the larger pattern of CSTO discourse, the following figure applies Entman's (1993) four uses of framing to how the alliance's purpose is portrayed.

Figure 4: Four uses of framing of alliance purpose applied to five examined instances

	Defined problem	Diagnosed cause	Moral judgment	Suggested remedy	Result: Alliance purpose
Kyrgyzstan	Internal unrest	Lack of legitimate leadership	Situation not appropriate for application of external military forces	"Political" solutions, shared law enforcement resources	Alliance as a source of resources to be discretely applied domestically.
Belarus	Internal matter with external origins	Undefined Western influences with economic and military capabilities	CSTO is needed and relevant	Increased intelligence agency contacts, emphasis on digital sovereignty in CSTO	Alliance as a multiplier of quantity and scope of resources.
Armenia	Ceasefire agreements broken; unwelcome third-party states involved in conflict	Provocations and violations	Threat is to security, not sovereignty	Political and diplomatic solutions	Alliance does not exist to address disputed territory.
Kazakhstan	Terrorists, extremists	External and internal influences	Bloc support required	CSTO peacekeepers deployed	Alliance as provider of troops when domestic options are

					insufficient or untrustworthy.
Russia	Foreign troops active in “zone of responsibility”	NATO, Western aggression	Legitimate basis for intervention lacking	Silence, deepened institutional connections	Alliance does not exist to address disputed territory.

As can be seen, the CSTO is most frequently framed as a provider of resources rather than as an instrument for direct application in conflict management, particularly when third-party states are involved. The sharing of resources typically occurs in contexts which are not broadly advertised to the public (in the case of Kyrgyzstan and Belarus), which contrasts with the heavily publicized peacekeeper deployment to Kazakhstan in 2022. This may have been an intentional signal to the perceived untrustworthy elements in the Kazakhstani security apparatus, whereas the resources shared in Kyrgyzstan and Belarus were intended to support the regime’s managing of the public. Therefore, I can surmise that the intended end recipient of the application of the resources (citizens in the cases of Kyrgyzstan and Belarus, elites/law enforcement in the case of Kazakhstan) determines the extent to which the resources are framed as important and noteworthy of media attention, affecting public perception of the alliance and its activity.

Below, figure 5 synthesizes the “stock of commonly invoked frames” (Entman, 1993, p. 53) within the CSTO which are used to determine how the alliance conceptualizes sovereignty.

Figure 5: Stock of commonly used frames:

Non-state actors as acceptable sources of threat	State actors = political solutions	Consent + unanimity = legitimacy
Differences in member states’ policy: sign of sovereignty	“Harmonization” of legislation	Alliance is a “military-political” entity
Stability + predictability = success	“Zone of responsibility”	External-internal dynamics justify scope of alliance’s work

Taking these frames and applying Krasner’s (2009) concepts of control and authority as the two components of sovereignty, a clearer picture of how a regional conception of sovereignty contributes to the perceived purpose of the alliance.

Control

The use of force by the alliance is highly regulated by an understanding of legitimacy that has at least two, potentially three, components. The first is that the head of state *must* issue an invitation for the deployment of troops to their territory. However, as seen in Kyrgyzstan's (and potentially Armenia's) case, this is insufficient as a singular condition. Nevertheless, that factor must be present for the alliance to attempt to clear the next hurdle, which is unanimity among member states on the proposed course of action. Both of these factors were present in the case of Kazakhstan, while one or the other were lacking in all other cases. Arguably, there may also be a third component – the existence of legal frameworks through which to regulate the planned response. However, because a) most CSTO legal agreements are not public and b) there has yet to be a case where the first two components were present but the third was not, it remains untested. Relying on the evidence of my five cases, the first two components emerge as the primary factors constructing the alliance's sense of legitimacy for their decision-making and the method to control how the alliance interacts with member-state sovereignty.

The fact that both hurdles – invitation and unanimity – have been cleared only once suggests that the “Eurasian order” is highly cautious as a whole about when and where to use military force. If the instances of training (in relation to Armenia and Russia/Ukraine) were indeed instances of aborted plans, it signals that members of the post-Soviet space struggle to operate openly as a military bloc. Indeed, this is the source of most Western criticism of the CSTO. Nevertheless, it suggests that Russia and its regime under Putin does not possess sufficient control over other member states *as a collective* to coerce them into military activity that violates the alliance's sense of sovereignty (informed by other member-states beyond Russia). The balance of power and assertion of sovereign decision-making is perhaps not as Russia-centric as often assumed, at least not when it comes to conflict and troop deployments. Furthermore, this could explain why Russia frequently relies on bilateral ties to “solve” problems, including sending peacekeepers to Armenia, supporting Belarus in 2020, or even its deal with North Korea during the war in Ukraine. Despite CSTO member states framing themselves as sharing a Soviet past, implying a certain amount of similarity or shared construct of the world, the difficulty in achieving consensus on issues of military force challenges this

assumption of similarity and indicates the extent to which the CSTO acts as a brake on military activity.

Authority

There is a social taboo for CSTO member states' troops to be seen openly fighting against citizens of the former Soviet Union. This is visible in the aversion to conflict intervention with military force and the explicit approval that the peacekeepers in Kazakhstan earned by not engaging with protesters (and indeed, not being stationed in locations where this could even occur). At first glance, this contradicts practically every case examined here (Armenia-Azerbaijan, Russia-Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan). However, in no instance has a *coalition* of former post-Soviet states allied to collectively fight against another post-Soviet state or its citizens. Bilateral conflicts are treated as instances of threats to security, not sovereignty, and do not prompt *allied* responses. Authority over citizens is recognized as vested in each state, and a strong norm has developed against permitting a group of external military forces to act openly against one's citizens. Because of the emphasis on non-state actors as appropriate recipients of alliance action, this necessarily excludes citizens from that conceptualization. Citizens are under authority of the state and only when they are removed from that authority are they considered "available" targets. The hundreds of thousands of Belarusian protesters could not all be credibly labeled as terrorists, nor could the official Ukrainian army. The circumstances in Kazakhstan presented every opportunity for the CSTO to deploy CRRF against people discursively primed as terrorists and extremists. Yet this was not done. By framing threats stemming from another post-Soviet state as a threat to security, not to sovereignty, this appropriate solution becomes political rather than military.

The question of political authority appears to be understood quite differently than the question of military authority. Although much remains classified, there are enough comments made to understand that significant levels of cooperation exist among member state intelligence and law enforcement agencies. Furthermore, the role which the CSTO Parliamentary Assembly plays in supporting the "harmonization" of foreign and domestic policy suggests that member states have fewer qualms in pooling political and legal resources. Many of the ways the CSTO decided to respond to the conflicts evaluated here involved sharing political resources, rather than military resources. There is little indication that these political resources were controversial

or unwelcome; indeed, if anything, the political institutionalization of the CSTO has only increased with time, indicating a willingness to expand this facet of the alliance. I argue that this willingness to pool political authority with alliance structures is connected to the regime type of its members. As autocratic states, their elite structures are primarily concerned with retaining power. If pooling some authority results in more resources through which to control, surveil, and when necessary, repress oppositionary aspects of the domestic population, it is a price members appear willing to pay.

The following table depicts how the CSTO's regional conception of sovereignty aligns with Krasner's (2009) four categories of sovereignty, points of alignment or non-alignment, and how this regional interpretation impacts the perceived purpose of the alliance.

Figure 6: CSTO Conceptions of Sovereignty as Applied to Krasner's (2009) Categories

	The CSTO	Regional Nuances	Impact on Alliance Purpose
International legal sovereignty	General alignment	Disinterested in clarifying disputed territorial boundaries (e.g. Nagorno Karabakh, Crimea).	Legitimacy of members linked to legal statehood, but questions of territory and borders fall outside purview of alliance and fail to activate alliance.
Westphalian sovereignty	Very high	Consent + unanimity structure presents high threshold for legitimate interference.	Troop deployment and explicit interference very rare, but possible.
Domestic sovereignty	Somewhat low	Alliance institutions contribute to sharing political, legal, and law enforcement resources.	Most activity occurs at this level; challenges to domestic sovereignty trigger increased access to resources through alliance mechanisms.
Inter-dependence sovereignty	Variable; context specific	Varying extent of digital control in member-states; Afghan-Tajik border still permeable with drugs, trafficking; Russia holds outsized influence over	Varying alliance energy/focus applied to this level – despite high levels of shared discourse, this is of secondary importance.

		production, supply, and training of weapons and troops	
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The alliance is still understood to exist to counter threats, aligning with broad understandings of what collective security alliances do. However, because the definition of threats significantly skews towards non-state actors as elements which threaten sovereignty, this defines the situations to which the alliance can respond. Furthermore, these non-state actors are typically framed as either foreign elements which have migrated to member-state territory and require removal, or as local elements which have been corrupted by external influence (typically implied to be either Islamist extremism or Western liberal-democratic values). Either way, there is an internal/external dynamic to these threats which justifies an internal/external dimension to the alliance. This explains the many non-military (that is, “political”) reactions the alliance has had to conflicts in its “zone of responsibility,” as well as the existence of the Parliamentary Assembly.

Because the understanding of Westphalian sovereignty in particular is quite high and requires a challenging threshold to cross, action which does pass the consent and unanimity structure is perceived as highly legitimate by member states. There have been no post-Kazakhstan indications of regret or other negative attitudes by CSTO members, suggesting that should both conditions be fulfilled in future conflicts, the CSTO could build on their existing precedent of troop deployment. In particular, the Kazakhstan example has proven the usefulness of the alliance as a forum for regime support in the event of internal elite resistance. In this sense, the CSTO reflects the thoroughly autocratic nature of its members and what they consider the ultimate threat to their sovereignty.

Based upon the kinds of responses generated by instances of conflict and the types of institutions built by the CSTO, the primary utility of the alliance for its members is as a forum for knowledge and resource transfer. It is clear that the Russian military has shared learnings from Syria and Ukraine with other alliance members, granting them training and insights otherwise inaccessible. Furthermore, the alliance facilitates training and skills development for a wide range of actors. This includes standard military and leadership training, but also training for police, other domestic law enforcement agencies, and emergency response crews. Additionally, it is clear that Russia in particular places high value on the Parliamentary Assembly as a venue to

socialize legislation for codification in other member states. Here, the lower level of domestic sovereignty is apparent as ideas and resources are shared and spread between alliance members in their pursuit of domestic power retention.

Taking an obverse view, what is the CSTO not used for? First and foremost, the alliance does not operate as an entity to be deployed in every instance of border violation or conflict. Threats to sovereignty must fulfill specific criteria to be considered instances appropriate for the alliance to address. Political responses have a lower threshold for approval than military action, which requires very high levels of alliance unity to generate. The CSTO is also not used for collective military action against citizens of another post-Soviet state. This does not mean that the alliance's political activity does not have an impact on each other's citizens, but such influence trickles down to citizens via domestic structures rather than stemming directly from external sources. Overall, the CSTO's conception of sovereignty – including what constitutes threats, violations, conflict, and appropriate defensive measures – impacts how members view the purpose of the CSTO, with the internal/external threat dynamic reflected in the political/military dimension of alliance activity.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to provide an explanatory framework for the CSTO's pattern of action and inaction, ultimately pointing to why its members find purpose in the alliance. Despite a 20-year history (longer, if one counts the Collective Treaty Organization's founding in the '90s) and relatively stable membership, the CSTO's willingness to deploy troops in only a single case appears to contradict its mandate as a collective security organization tasked with ensuring the "security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity" (ODKB, 2012) of its members. They have faced a wide range of conflict situations and challenges to sovereignty in various forms, including from external sources outside a member's borders and from internal sources within the country. Regardless, the CSTO has appeared reluctant to activate its military capabilities to respond to conflict, with the conspicuous exception in 2022 of "Bloody January" in Kazakhstan. However, rather than seeking to only explain the alliance's use of troops in that single instance, I sought to interrogate how a regional understanding of sovereignty could impact the alliance's perceived purpose as a whole.

To do so, I turned to English School theory to lay the theoretical framework. ES considers sovereignty to be one of the six foundational primary institutions which also include balance of power, war, diplomacy, international law, and great power management. These all make up the "building blocks" of global international society, or the set of norms and rules accepted by states across the globe which construct the network of how international politics operates. However, ES theorists also acknowledge that within global international society, regional characteristics affect how these primary institutions are understood and applied, leading to heterogeneity and opportunities for contestation and reinterpretation via regional international societies. One of the main forums through which primary institutions are applied is via secondary institutions, or organizational bodies intentionally created with specific spatial-temporal aims in mind by a group of actors. Secondary institutions, including alliances, reflect and reinforce the "boundaries" primary institutions construct. However, secondary institutions also provide space for actors to adjust their application of primary institutions, which sets up a feedback loop that in turn can slowly shift the meaning of primary institutions.

I examined how sovereignty is a contested concept that does not have a single agreed-upon meaning and can manifest in various forms. I particularly relied on Krasner's (2009) conceptualization of sovereignty and his argument that the concept today mainly comes in four forms, international legal sovereignty, Westphalian sovereignty, domestic sovereignty, and interstate sovereignty. All these forms relate to varying combinations of authority and control, the two ideas Krasner argues are at the root of all forms of sovereignty. Additionally, I reviewed how existing alliance research has already put forward various theories about why states find alliances useful: as tools of deterrence, to reduce the likelihood of MIDs, to provide large states with leverage over the foreign policy of small states, or even to support autocratic regimes in their efforts to purge elites. The variety of "reasons" for allying that have already been uncovered suggests that the purpose members find in alliance membership should not be assumed to be equal from one alliance to the next. In fact, ES theory argues that because secondary institutions (such as an alliance like the CSTO) reflect the primary institutions which they exist to reinforce, that a regionalized interpretation of a primary institution (such as sovereignty) will impact the way a secondary institution comports itself.

With this theoretical background in mind, I anticipated that the CSTO would exhibit signs of regional differentiation in the understanding of sovereignty, and that this differentiation would be a combination of otherwise global understandings with local interpretations grafted on. I expected that these local interpretations would continue to align with Krasner's theory that authority and control constitute the building blocks for "kinds" of sovereignty. Furthermore, my theoretical expectations included that the regional understanding of sovereignty would have a direct impact on where alliance members locate the purpose of the alliance in terms of appropriate fields of oversight and kinds of legitimate reactions.

To investigate my topic, I utilized a constructivist methodology. Specifically, I used framing analysis to examine discourse from the CSTO, including documents and news posts on the organization's website. My framing analysis relied on Entman's (1993) theory, in which he argues that frames are a discursive practice that turn information (a "cue") into actionable belief structures. The process of framing allows actors to jump from what *is* to what *ought to be*, or in my case, how the CSTO frames challenges to member-state sovereignty which both creates a particular collective understanding of sovereignty and legitimizes certain kinds of alliance

behavior, while other options are shut off from the realm of appropriate possibility. I selected five instances where CSTO member states experienced challenges to their sovereignty to examine in greater detail, intentionally selecting cases that included both external and internal facets to conflict.

My research question guiding my analysis was *How does CSTO member states' understanding of sovereignty affect the perceived usefulness of the alliance?* I discovered that control is highly valued and exploited by the smaller member states as a way to express their sovereignty within the alliance, limiting the alliance's range of appropriate responses, while authority within the alliance sparks highly differentiated responses depending on whether it is a matter of military (constrained responses) or political (welcomed responses) affairs. Indeed, this demonstrates that where and how the CSTO positions control and authority within its institutional mechanisms impacts how the alliance pursues action.

In evaluating the CSTO's patterns of discourse and behavior in light of Krasner's (2009) emphasis on control and authority as indicators of sovereignty, I found that member-states exert control over alliance military activity in one another's territory by adhering to strict conceptions of what constitutes legitimate action. In order for troops to be deployed, two factors must be fulfilled: an official invitation must be issued by the head of state to the CSTO, and the CSTO must unanimously approve the course of action. The difficulty in fulfilling both conditions is very high and contributes to what Western analysts view as disfunction or stagnation of the CSTO. However, for decisions which clear both hurdles, the resulting action is perceived as highly legitimate and enjoys full support from all member states. Additionally, the CSTO's caution to respond militarily also suggests that Russia/Putin does not possess as much control over other member states as perhaps assumed. In this sense, the CSTO acts as a forum for the smaller states to exert control over the Eurasian space by maximizing the use of their veto power over Russian ambitions. This also helps explain why Russia so frequently resorts to bilateral action when engaging with conflicts in Eurasian regional international society. Overall, these two factors suggest that control is highly valued and exploited by the smaller member states as a way to express their sovereignty.

When examining where authority is located within the alliance, it is striking that the members (all post-Soviet states) have never been willing to *collectively* join forces against

citizens of another post-Soviet state. Citizens are viewed as falling under the authority of the state and therefore outside the realm as appropriate targets of collective military action, even in times of conflict. The alliance's discursive emphasis on non-state actors (extremists, terrorists, foreign-trained bandits, etc.) is necessary to divorce the authority of the state over the source of the perceived threat. Equally, however, member-states reveal far more willingness to pool authority when it comes to "political," legal, and military-adjacent (intelligence, law enforcement, etc.) resources. In the political realm, member-states are willing to give up some amount of authority to access resources which are perceived as useful for retaining domestic control. In this sense, the positioning of authority within the alliance sparks highly differentiated responses depending on whether it is a matter of military or political affairs.

To better compare the CSTO's positioning of sovereignty in comparison to global "types" of sovereignty, I additionally evaluated the CSTO against Krasner's (2009) four kinds of sovereignty. I found that the CSTO shows general alignment with the principle of international legal sovereignty, revealing the facet of sovereignty as a primary institution in global international society that the CSTO accepts as a given in how states relate with and to one another. In terms of Westphalian sovereignty, the CSTO accords this aspect very high meaning, as reflected in their reluctance to invite alliance troops to assist in response to challenges and conflict. However, in terms of domestic sovereignty, the CSTO ranks rather low, demonstrated by their willingness to open domestic institutions up to influence and resources offered by member states. Finally, the CSTO has an inconsistent relationship with inter-dependence sovereignty because this varies case-by-case. For example, the extent to which digital information is controlled, monitored, and censored varies from country to country.

Finally, I highlight that the alliance's description of threats imbues them with both internal and external features. This may include external elements which are claimed to have penetrated the border and now operate from within the country or through internal elements engaging with "foreign" ideas and methods. By framing threats to consistently have internal and external features, this impacts how the alliance defines the scope of security and justifies an alliance structure which is both internally and externally focused. That the CSTO frequently calls for "political responses" to conflict is a consequence of the emphasis on the internal dimension of threats and security. This, I argue, should not be seen as proof that the alliance is

dysfunctional, but that the alliance functions with a logic that has evolved to fit regional notions of sovereignty, particularly as relate to regime security.

Overall, where and how the CSTO positions control and authority within its institutional mechanism – indications of its regionalized understanding of sovereignty – impact how the alliance facilitates interaction in the political sphere while still defining such activity as appropriate for the alliance. In this sense, analysts and scholars, particularly in the West, would perhaps do well to stop thinking of it as an alliance whose aims are specifically military in nature and more as a security alliance with the understanding that as states possessing authoritarian regimes, any securitized aspects of society fall under the umbrella of “security.” This thesis provides a case study for examining how a primary institution such as sovereignty is incorporated into a regional international society via a secondary institution, building on previous ES scholarship about the Eurasia region (e.g. Pourchot & Stivachtis, 2013). The CSTO, as a secondary institution, is a forum for the application of the bloc’s approach to sovereignty, engaging in Spandler’s (2015) constitution and institutionalization of a norm which, as I demonstrated, possesses Krasner’s (2009) four types of sovereignty in different capacities which I understand to be the regionally differentiated pattern of sovereignty which has evolved.

In terms of the limitations of my study, by focusing on five instances of conflict involving CSTO member states, I placed more emphasis on the military aspect of the alliance as opposed to the “political” activities and organs, although my empirical research revealed that the political sphere is considered of key, if not equal, importance. Therefore, a truly comprehensive examination of the alliance’s interpretation of sovereignty would require inclusion of the documents and rhetoric found on the CSTO Parliamentary Assembly’s site, which is separate from the CSTO’s main web presence and the basis of my empirical analysis. A study on the extent to which the Parliamentary Assembly’s recommendations for adjustments to members’ legal codes are implemented would be well merited as way to judge the extent of the alliance’s apparent willingness to pool domestic sovereignty. In that sense, my results remain partially incomplete while providing a firm foundation for additional research.

My findings challenge the existing field of alliance literature to look beyond universal notions of the purpose of alliances. This study shows that regional norms affect how alliances operate to the extent that intervention or non-intervention activity is impacted. Alliances should

not be assumed to operate with equally similar patterns of logic, even when it comes to instances of conflict. Furthermore, this research presents a novel way of thinking about the CSTO heretofore lacking in the academic discussion about the alliance. Rather than relying on familiar narratives that the alliance either operates solely as an arm of Russian influence or that it is a failed alliance, I argue that there are specific logics underpinning its pattern of behavior which are observable. This introduces significant nuance into the study of the alliance and invites further studies to particularly investigate the political activity of the CSTO. Finally, this study is an applied example of ES's argument that primary and secondary institutions are co-constitutive and serves as evidence that regional international societies differentiate themselves from global international society in the way they integrate primary institutions into their societies.

My findings suggest that even though the world indeed may be headed towards becoming “a world of regions” (Katzenstein, 2015, p. 1), primary institutions such as sovereignty will likely be slow to be abandoned (if they are abandoned at all) due to their institutionalization in secondary institutions such as the CSTO. If primary institutions constitute the building blocks of the “game” of politics, states remain eager to continue existing as bordered entities and assert some amount of control over what occurs inside those borders, suggesting that sovereignty remains highly relevant. Regional differentiation consists in the rules by which the blocks are moved on the board and understanding the increasingly nuanced rulebooks for various regional international societies will become paramount when conducting trans-regional trade, diplomacy, or people-to-people exchanges. The CSTO itself is aware of the changing nature of the world and its leadership frames its activity as central to the changes. In a speech only months into his post as Secretary General, Taalatbek Masadykov claimed that “the nature and contours of a polycentric world will likely be determined by the situation on the Eurasian continent” (CSTO, 2026). As scholars like Flockhart and Acharya develop their theories on multi-ordering and multiplexity, it may be worthwhile to consider how certain secondary institutions may *consciously* accelerate processes of differentiation and regionalization, rather than “organically” evolve regionalized norms.

In conclusion, this thesis demonstrated that the CSTO has developed a regionally differentiated understanding of sovereignty which impacts how its members view the purpose of the alliance. They place a particularly high value on Westphalian sovereignty and accept

relatively low levels of domestic sovereignty, while the principle of international legal sovereignty is generally accepted. The nuances of this regionally defined sovereignty consist in how the alliance positions control and authority. Specifically, this results in a difficult two-rung threshold to approve military activity (invitation and unanimity), the smaller states' exploitation of their veto power (forcing Russia to find other avenues to engage militarily with the region), a taboo around *groupings* of post-Soviet states using military force against other post-Soviet states (leading to a threat definition that emphasizes non-state actors), and a willingness to pool domestic political resources to effectively retain their grip on power (demonstrating an internal facet for what constitutes security). ES theory understands this phenomenon as one where regional international societies adjust primary institutions to fit regional normative frameworks, making the primary institution appropriate for regional use. In this context, a secondary institution – the CSTO – has played a key role in institutionalizing how sovereignty is understood within Eurasia. Through forces of constitution, the regionalized conception of sovereignty impacts the secondary institution itself, affecting how the alliance understands its role as a provider of security with both internal and external components.

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