REGIONAL TENSIONS FRACTURING RUSSIA'S ALLIANCES

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Joshua Kucera, Eurasianet.org, 28 January 2016

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That tension has been heightened recently as a result of increasing violence along the line of contact between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces around the disputed Nagorno Karabakh territory, as well as the fallout between Russia and Turkey.

The CSTO's Turkic members, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, have sympathized with Turkey over Russia in that dispute to a degree that is suprising given Russia's far stronger economic and strategic ties in Central Asia. And if they're not willing to support Russia -- which really has the ability to either pressure or help the Central Asian states -- they are certainly far less likely to support Armenia, which they have little in common other than a fading Soviet legacy.

The schism doesn't have only to do pan-Turkic sympathies between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, and Azerbaijan. Belarus, too, has refused to take the Kremlin's side against Turkey. Just as important as any cultural ties is a reluctance among all of Russia's allies to sign up for Moscow's increasingly unpredictable foreign policy ventures.

Meanwhile, Armenia's ties with Russia via the CSTO have only been getting stronger. Yerevan has effectively served as the Kremlin's mouthpiece in Moscow's repeated attempts to demonstrate, unconvincingly, that the CSTO backs Russia against Turkey. And Russia has said that the next CSTO

secretary general will be Armenian.

This tension again burst into the open at last month's CSTO summit in Moscow, where Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan publicly criticized his allies: "Every time that Azerbaijan's armed forces use small arms fire of all calibres, mortars and artillery against the Republic of Armenia, they are firing at Astana, Dushanbe, and Bishkek, at Moscow and Minsk. Remember that there is the corresponding article in the charter."

The CSTO Secretary General Nikolay Bordyuzha visited Yerevan this week and was asked, at a joint press conference with Foreign Minister David Nalbandian about Sargsyan's "criticism." Both sides denied there was any such thing. "There was no such criticism," Nalbandian said. "What sort of criticism would there be?" Bordyuzha asked.

Of course, Armenia's criticism isn't directed at Moscow but at the other CSTO allies. Its non-Russian members -- Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan -- have little interest in defending one another, and it's hard to imagine Belarus intervening in, say, Tajikistan, or Tajikistan in Kazakhstan, except in the most symbolic fashion. The organization, rather, has been a sort of multilateral facade for Russia's bilateral security relationships with all of these countries. That facade, though, is looking more and more rickety.