

# A PAPER TIGER IN THE CAUCASUS

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**Moscow and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) ignored appeals for help from an official ally.**

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**The credibility of Russia's military deterrence in former Soviet territory has weakened.**

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**The reason is the engagement and inefficiency of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine.**

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In September 2022, intense fighting broke out in the South Caucasus between Armenia and Azerbaijan. For almost two days, from 12 to 14 September, the Azerbaijani armed forces launched indirect fire attacks on targets deep inside Armenian territory, including towns and small settlements. Meanwhile, Azerbaijani units crossed Armenia's internationally recognised border and moved several kilometres into the country's territory.

**In the September 2022 clashes, Azerbaijan openly attacked Armenian sovereign territory for the first time.**

Since the late spring of 2021, numerous armed clashes have occurred between Armenia and Azerbaijan. But the conflict of September 2022 differed from previous clashes in one important aspect: for the first time, Azerbaijan openly attacked Armenian sovereign territory. Both during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War (from September to November 2020) and since, Azerbaijan has always denied attacking targets in Armenia and claimed that its armed forces had not crossed the internationally recognised state border.

The main reason for Azerbaijan's caution was most probably Armenia's strategic alliance with Russia and its CSTO membership. Formed in 2002, the CSTO, in its current format, is a Russia-led organisation that has been touted for years by Moscow as one of the main security guarantors on the territory of the former Soviet Union. As a kind of "NATO of the East", CSTO security guarantees are triggered if any of its member states are attacked, which is when the other member states – primarily Russia, of course – should come to the aid of the victim of the attack.<sup>1</sup>

During the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Russia and the CSTO rejected Armenia's official appeals for help specifically on the grounds that Armenian sovereign territory had not been attacked – the hostilities took place on Azerbaijan's internationally recognised territory.

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<sup>1</sup> CSTO members are Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.



Russia alone fits under the “umbrella” of Russia’s security guarantees. Vladimir Putin is waiting to meet Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on the steps of his residence in Sochi on 31 October 2022.

Source: Sergei Bobylev / AP

**During the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, Russia and the CSTO rejected Armenia’s requests for assistance specifically on the grounds that Armenian sovereign territory had not been attacked.**

In September 2022, Armenia also submitted a formal request for assistance to the CSTO. This time, the violation of Armenia’s internationally recognised borders was obvious. In response, the organisation did not send weapons or troops to Armenia but dispatched a commission of inquiry. Neither did Russia conduct a military intervention on its own to defend its official ally.

The Armenian government then openly acknowledged that the security guarantees offered by Russia bilaterally and the CSTO had proven to be an illusion and ceased to exist. Participants at the CSTO summit in Yerevan in November 2022 were “greeted” by hundreds of Armenian demonstrators in the city streets, with placards calling Russia an enemy and demanding Armenia’s withdrawal from the CSTO.

**The Armenian government has openly acknowledged that the security guarantees so far have been an illusion and have ceased to exist.**

Two main conclusions can be drawn from the reaction of Russia and the CSTO to the September 2022 clashes in Armenia.

First, the credibility of Russia’s military deterrence in the South Caucasus and in the wider area of the former Soviet Union has significantly reduced, at least for the time being. The reasons for this are: (1) the Russian armed forces and military capabilities’ engagement in Ukraine and (2) Russia’s failure to achieve convincing military success in its aggression against Ukraine.

Second, the security guarantees offered by Russia bilaterally and within the framework of the CSTO have proved to be merely declarative. Russia intervenes militarily to defend its “allies” only when it is in its interest. But not when the alleged allies need help or when a treaty would require to do so. However, the CSTO has turned out to be a “paper tiger”: a chatroom, not a serious defence organisation.

These two conclusions have very likely been drawn not only among Armenian leaders but also in the capitals of all other CSTO member states.