



## Journal Issue

### **CSTO and SCO**

**Author(s):**

Weitz, Richard; Kizekova, Alicia

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## CSTO AND SCO

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## The Collective Security Treaty Organization: Past Struggles and Future Prospects

By Richard Weitz, Washington

### Abstract

The CSTO has been expanding its defense capabilities, legal mandate, and range of missions in recent years, and has emerged as the main regional defense alliance in Eurasia. Nonetheless, the continuing war in Afghanistan, the contested democratic legitimacy of CSTO member states, Russia's newly assertive stance in Ukraine and Moscow's focus on building a Eurasian Union that might take on its own military dimension mean that the CSTO faces major challenges in coming years.

Nikolai Bordyuzha, who has been Secretary General of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) since April 2003, was one of the headline speakers at the May 23 International Security Conference in Moscow, organized by the Russian Ministry of Defense. General Bordyuzha—whose impressive resume includes service in the Soviet KGB, head of the presidential administration, Russian National Security Advisor, and former Russian ambassador to Denmark—joined with Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov in denouncing the West's alleged overthrow of the government of Ukraine, NATO's military buildup during the current crisis, and Washington's supposed campaign to promote social revolutions throughout the Middle East. In his view, the United States was employing sanctions, other economic threats, hiring mercenaries, and manipulating the cyber domain to weaken Russia and other competing centers of power. In the face of such an onslaught, Bordyuzha said that the CSTO would concentrate on preventing and managing conflicts in its Eurasian region of responsibility, including by addressing border tensions, transnational terrorism, and competition for water and energy resources.

The previous month Bordyuzha had announced that the CSTO had suspended contacts with NATO because of the Ukraine crisis and NATO's alleged efforts to "blackmail" Russia and all its CSTO allies. This move was largely an empty gesture, since NATO had studiously avoided dealing with the CSTO since its founding more than a decade ago. U.S. and other NATO officials have been reluctant to formalize relations with the CSTO for fear of reinforcing Moscow's preeminence in Central Asia. Western security experts have generally considered the organization as a hollow front organization that Moscow employs as an instrument to influence its neighbors' defense policies. It is true that the CSTO, led by a Russian general and with a staff based in Moscow, has served as a key element in Russia's drive to strengthen Moscow's influence in the former Soviet Union. While Belarus and Armenia provide

CSTO with security interests in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, the organization's primary regional focus has been Central Asia. There the CSTO has bolstered Moscow's influence by helping justify Russia's bases in the region, providing incentives for Central Asian militaries to cooperate with Russia, and potentially providing legal justification for Russian military interventions. But the other member governments, excluded from NATO or any other powerful defense alliance, have seen benefits in participating in the CSTO. Many of its member governments fear that the Arab Spring will spread north and threaten their own rule, while NATO's declining presence in Afghanistan is leading Central Asian states to rely more on Moscow for their security. Of course, the specific motives for membership differ for each state. Whereas Belarus fears Western-backed efforts to replace its authoritarian government, Armenia sees the CSTO as providing a means to strengthen its military potential against rival Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, the Central Asia member governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan feel threatened by narcotics trafficking and terrorist groups seeking to replace the region's secular governments with overtly Islamist structures.

### Missions and Capabilities

The CSTO's originally declared focus was countering external military aggression against member countries, but its governments have since been authorizing the CSTO's use for a wider range of possible missions. The organization's publically stated objectives are maintaining the national and collective security of its members, promoting cooperation among them in the political-military sphere, coordinating their foreign policies, establishing collective mechanisms for integrating members' capabilities, and fighting modern transnational threats such as international terrorism, drug trafficking, illegal migration, organized crime, and misuse of information technologies. CSTO members have committed to inform one another of any defense ties with non-members, especially decisions to buy weapons from these states or host foreign military bases on their soil. Con-

versely, Russian officials have used the CSTO to legitimize their own military presence in other former Soviet republics. For example, they justified Russia's military facilities in Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic as contributing to CSTO multinational missions.

The CSTO is engaged in both offensive and defensive information operations. When they meet, CSTO leaders typically issue joint statements on various international security issues such as missile defense, Iran, and Syria. The intent is to amplify the impact of their individual views by speaking with a collective voice, trying to demonstrate widespread support for their policies. These joint declarations almost always support Moscow's position but can also back other members' policies. For example, at Armenia's initiative, in April 2014, the CSTO issued a collective statement condemning the occupation of the Syrian town of Kessab, populated by ethnic Armenians, by an al-Qaeda linked extremist group. The CSTO member governments, which exercise various forms of domestic media censorship, have expressed concern about how terrorists and other regime opponents exploit the Internet to recruit followers and organize subversive activities. Following Moscow's lead, the CSTO governments have sought to use the organization to strengthen their cyber defenses.

In terms of military capabilities, the CSTO was designed to mobilize large multinational coalitions in wartime under joint command. In addition to its original regional collective-defense groups, the CSTO has developed joint peacekeeping and rapid reaction forces consisting mostly of elite military units to counter terrorism, support intra-CSTO conflict-mediation, and, thanks to changes in the CSTO Charter since the 2010 ethnic unrest in Kyrgyzstan between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, prevent social upheavals in member countries. The Collective Rapid Reaction Force (KSOR) is designed to conduct lower-intensity operations, including peacekeeping, counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, emergency response, and combating drug trafficking and other transnational criminal activity. The KSOR's troops are kept in a higher state of readiness and, if deployed, would fall under multinational command. Unlike CSTO's three large multinational groups, the KSOR engages in regular exercises, especially in Central Asia, where the main transnational threats are concentrated. It includes special purpose forces as well as conventional combat troops. The Russian Ministry has already announced that it will hold another of the "Enduring Brotherhood" ("Nerushimoe Bratstvo") series of drills with its CSTO partners later this year, as well as a joint CSTO-India exercise. As a carrot and as a means of keeping its allies militarily dependent, the Russian government provides CSTO personnel with subsidized education and training

opportunities at Russian military institutions and allows CSTO allies to purchase Russian weapons at the same prices charged the Russian armed forces. The CSTO supports cooperation among members' defense industries, many of which were tightly connected as part of the integrated Soviet military-industrial complex. Plans for a joint CSTO Collective Air Force and a CSTO Air Defense and Missile Defense System also exist.

## Challenges

Since its creation, CSTO officials, strongly supported by the Russian government, have tried to receive official recognition by NATO as an equivalent regional alliance. The CSTO had made numerous proposals to establish formal cooperative programs with NATO to manage regional security issues, especially Afghanistan. These have focused on joint counternarcotics efforts. Perceiving the CSTO to be a Moscow-dominated institution and a mechanism to reinforce Russian hegemony in Central Asia, NATO collectively, and its individual members, has declined to engage with the CSTO on an organization-to-organization basis, and instead worked with CSTO members individually. Russia has responded by constraining NATO activities in Central Asia, including by encouraging Kyrgyzstan to end the U.S. military base at Manas and by blocking a U.S. Central Asian Counternarcotics Initiative to build a network of U.S.-supported anti-drug centers and task forces in Central Asia. Russia's occupation and annexation of Crimea has led to a sharp deterioration in relations between NATO and CSTO. NATO has called for Russia to withdraw from Crimea, while the CSTO leadership has accused NATO of violating its agreements with Russia by deploying forces to Eastern Europe. Having declined to join the other international forces undertaking a direct combat role in Afghanistan in defense of its government against the Taliban insurgency, the CSTO's main activity regarding that country has been to contain the drugs, terrorists, small arms and light weapons, and other maladies emanating from its soil.

CSTO governments have more recently expressed concern about the "social revolutions" in the Middle East and that civil war in Syria was helping recruit, train, and empower scores of Muslims militants, including some from Russia and Central Asia. At the September 2013 CSTO heads-of-state summit in Sochi, Putin warned CSTO governments that the Islamist extremists fighting in Syria could soon be fighting them. The communique issued at the summit also warned that any foreign (Western) military intervention in Syria would be "unacceptable" and illegal unless it had the approval of the UN Security Council, where Moscow has the power to veto resolutions. Focusing on foreign military threats



comes naturally to CSTO members, since the organization has found it difficult to help when its members experience internal threats. Even though the new Kyrgyz government appealed to the CSTO for assistance to halt the summer 2010 ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan, the CSTO leaders decided against sending in their forces to quell the violence, claiming the CSTO lacked a legal basis for doing so. Although the organization has since acquired a broader legal mandate, its governments are generally uncomfortable about having foreign countries, especially Russian, interfere militarily in their internal affairs, as demonstrated by their unease at the Russian military interventions against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014.

Disputes among CSTO members have continually weakened the organization's coherence. Border conflicts prevail in the Ferghana Valley, an ethnically-diverse and densely-populated agricultural region that since the Soviet Union's collapse has been artificially divided between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The recent Tajik-Kyrgyz border skirmishing has made Central Asia more vulnerable to narcoterrorism. Kyrgyzstan's parliament has questioned the CSTO's viability and usefulness due to its failure to address the confrontation. Nevertheless, the issue of border conflicts among member states falls outside the CSTO's mandate. The organization can mediate among members, but requires the explicit consent of the parties in conflict. The Tajik-Kyrgyz conflict has subsided for now, with both sides withdrawing armed units from their border and a joint-commission addressing border demarcation with CSTO assistance. Uzbekistan's withdrawal from the CSTO in 2010<sup>2</sup> has also made it easier for Kazakhstan, a periodic rival with Tashkent for regional primacy, to collaborate with Moscow in promoting regional security integra-

tion. Russian policy makers may reason that these internal conflicts helpfully allow Moscow to exploit regional tensions to advance its own interests, since many of the parties want Russian support against their regional rivals. Conversely, the failure of CSTO to always speak with a united voice on Russia's behalf is presumably less welcome in Moscow. The members have failed to endorse the results of Russia's military conquests in 2008 against Georgia; only Belarus has followed Moscow in recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Armenia has also complained about the reluctance of the CSTO to side with Yerevan in its territorial dispute with Azerbaijan. Russia's recent occupation and subsequent annexation of Crimea, justified in part on historical and ethnic ties, has unsettled many people in the other CSTO member states. Russia and the CSTO secretariat have had to reassure members that they would not have to send troops to fight on Russia's behalf in Ukraine.

NATO's declining presence in Afghanistan is creating a vacuum that the CSTO is being pressured to fill. The conflict with Ukraine is also presenting new security challenges for its members. Moscow's drive to establish a strong Eurasian Union further complicates the picture. Since the Union Treaty was only recently signed and the organization will not begin operating until next year, the precise membership and functions of the Eurasian Union remain unclear. Nevertheless, the new structure might include all the CSTO members and have some defense functions, making the CSTO a likely candidate for absorption in the same way that the European Union, deciding it needed an organic Common Security and Defence Policy, integrated the functions of the previously independent Western European Union a few years ago.

#### *About the Author*

Richard Weitz is Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Political-Military Analysis at Hudson Institute. His current research includes regional security developments relating to Europe, Eurasia, and East Asia, as well as U.S. foreign and defense policies. Dr. Weitz is also an Expert at Wikistrat and a non-resident Senior Fellow at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS).

## The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Regional Chessboards

By Alica Kizekova, Prague

### Abstract

In spite of its young age, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has managed to become a valuable tool for enhancing cooperation between China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. While all of its member states seem to agree that the most promising arena for cooperation is the socio-economic sphere, its primary challenge lies in ensuring regional stability and security at the same time as its individual member states balance their interests upon various chessboards. Russia's assertive behavior in the post-Soviet space and Afghanistan's struggle to combat terrorism, drug trafficking and organized crime are both testing the limits of the SCO's capability to contribute to the stabilization of the complex and rather unpredictable security environment of Central Asia.

### The Evolving SCO Chessboard

The SCO does not seek to impose a specific model for regional development on Central Asia, apart from stressing the importance of sustainable and constructive dialogue. According to its framework, member states are encouraged to view their national interests first and participate in and further their engagement with the SCO at a pace with which these national governments are comfortable, as long as they do not completely disregard the interests of their SCO partners. This perspective is premised on the belief that by having such a non-invasive approach to regional cooperation—based on open and flexible dialogue—a long-lasting organization can be built, which gradually matures and becomes stronger. As has been widely noted, the SCO's development is closely linked to the institutionalization of Sino-Russian relations.<sup>1</sup> Beijing views the SCO as a unique platform for enhancing its interests in Central Asia and, contrary to popular belief, is not preoccupied with using the SCO as a balancing tool *vis-à-vis* Russia or the United States. Moscow, on the other hand, pursues a multidirectional foreign policy when it comes to maintaining its regional influence in Central Asia, positioning itself as a potential 'bridge' between the European and Pacific arenas.

Having these two prominent great powers—both with global aspirations—as the key drivers of the SCO has naturally attracted attention from elsewhere in the world, with particular interest focused on the organization's behavior in situations involving these two players, and its relations to other external actors active in Central Asia. While in 2005 the primary concern of analysts was how the SCO would jointly respond to the longevity of an external (US/NATO)

military presence in the region,<sup>2</sup> more recently focus has shifted to how the member states are reacting to Russia's engagements in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014).

### Russia's Chessboards in its Near Neighborhood

The SCO's lukewarm support for Russia's interventions in both Georgia and Ukraine raised eyebrows worldwide. In this way, the SCO has largely managed to preserve its guiding principle of not allowing a single state or issue to overshadow the rest of its agenda. However, Russia's preference for military interference in its neighborhood may make it harder for China, and subsequently the SCO, to remain impartial on such issues in the future, and could lead to the SCO taking a more pro-active approach to mediating tensions within the region. Such a shift is, however, unlikely in the near future considering China's stance on non-interference and its lack of experience in mediating international conflicts. Additionally, China has been subjected to a major dilemma in relation to the Ukraine crisis, as it has had to navigate between several important trading partners: Russia, Ukraine, the EU and the US. In this context, Beijing has articulated its neutrality, while its leadership subsequently released a first blue paper on national security, which hinted at a strategy of balancing its ties with all major partners by "allying with Russia, reaching out to and enhancing relations with Europe, and stabilizing relations with the US."<sup>3</sup>

The SCO members have repeatedly declared that the organization was neither established to function as a security alliance that would act in regional conflicts against third parties, nor to meddle in its member states' internal affairs. It has, however, acknowledged that since its establishment new problems have arisen

1 Aris, S. 2008 "Russian-Chinese relations, through the Lens of the SCO," *Russie.Nei.Visions* (34): 246–249; Kizekova, A. and B. Ho. 2014 "The Future of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Sino-Russian Interactions," *Izvestiya Irkutskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta* («the Bulletin of Irkutsk State University») (7): 108–115.

2 The joint call for setting a deadline for the withdrawal of troops in the aftermath of the Andijan Uprising in Uzbekistan in 2005.

3 See Yu Bin, 2014 "Western Civil War' Déjà Vu?" CSIS, *Comparative Connections* 15 (3) for an informative overview of China's neutrality with Chinese characteristics in the Ukraine crisis.

beyond the scope of its initial focus on the ‘three evils’: terrorism, extremism and separatism. Nonetheless, the organization continues to concentrate on the same non-traditional security threats (drug and human trafficking, weapon smuggling, use of information and communication technologies for destructive purposes) that have been on its radar for years. The US government and the United Nations have acknowledged the SCO’s role in countering terrorism and narcotics in Eurasia on more than one occasion. Moreover, the member states aspire to have a global impact on issues such as international information security and the prevention of cyber conflicts.<sup>4</sup>

Commentators have downplayed the SCO’s preparedness to respond to regional security challenges, pointing to its lack of binding agreements, its underfunded institutional organs and the lack of strong commitment to the organization from individual member states. Although it has developed into a complex institutional structure and its member states interact frequently through multilevel meetings in both official track-one frameworks (heads of states, ministerial meetings) and non-official track-two arenas (SCO Forum), it has yet to evolve into a fully-fledged regional organization that is able to tackle all the multidimensional security challenges present in contemporary Central Asia.

In response, Russia has proposed setting up a ‘Universal Center for Countering Threats to the Security of SCO Member States’, as a hub for expert analysis. This initiative would bring a more comprehensive approach to dealing with security challenges by transforming the current Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS). This permanent body is in charge of a specialized portfolio and thus unable to address the full array of threats facing the member-states beyond terrorism, which are often interlinked.

## Afghanistan—the Source of Several Threats and Challenges

The most pressing ‘chessboard’ for the SCO member states lies in Afghanistan (an SCO observer member since 2012). Afghanistan poses various security threats, and the post-2014 withdrawal of US and NATO troops raises a question about how the SCO will act to secure the region without the presence of allied forces. A great deal depends on how fast and in what numbers the US and NATO troops depart from Afghanistan. The Obama administration confirmed that the current US troop contingent of 32,000 will be cut to 9,800 after 2014. And even these troops will gradually be withdrawn until all have left by the end of 2016. This decision has already been criticized by various parties from the Republican camp, as well as officials and

military personnel closely connected to military strategic planning. The main criticism surrounds the public declaration of the withdrawal, which has provided the Taliban and other groups with a set date for when they could further escalate their operations.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, there is not much unity among the approaches of the EU and NATO to the security situation in Afghanistan.

Equally, the SCO also does not seem to have a cohesive strategy on how to deal with Afghanistan’s security. The SCO member states recognize that the Afghan government is not in full control of its territory and that it is unable to protect its own people. Although many of the security threats to its member states emanate from Afghanistan, the SCO does not have the competence to intervene in a non-member state’s domestic affairs. The organization is ill-equipped to respond militarily and lacks adequate finance to fund potential military operations in Afghanistan. It has formed an international operational command for eradicating narcotics production, but there has not been any agreement to commit troops. Furthermore, the SCO has not ever engaged in the collective military trainings of Afghan counter-narcotics operations, in a fashion similar to those conducted by NATO, or bilaterally by Russia. Moscow, in particular, has focused on boosting the protection of state borders, migration controls and equipping the CSTO’s Collective Rapid Reaction Force.<sup>6</sup>

Russia’s national coordinator to the SCO, Kirill Barsky, explained in an interview to the InfoSHOS web portal (October 2013) that the SCO could not replace the coalition forces in the aftermath of the US/NATO withdrawal, but that it could assist Afghanistan in strengthening its law enforcement and supporting it in socio-economic development. This view has been shared by Kazakh experts, who also express confidence in the SCO’s capacity to provide humanitarian assistance or mediation. They believe that the main sources of the conflict and insecurity are rooted not in military confrontation, but in poor socio-economic conditions, and thus consider that the SCO should contribute to Afghanistan’s economic development, rather than responding militarily, in order to stabilize the security situation.<sup>7</sup>

## A Promising Silk Road Economic Belt?

One SCO initiative that could involve Afghanistan is the proposal made by the Chinese President Xi Jinping during his September 2013 visit to Central Asia that a *Silk*

4 Kizekova, A., 2012 “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Challenges in Cyberspace,” RSIS Commentary (033).

5 Gordon, M.R. 2014 “Criticism Over Troop Withdrawal Emerges From Beyond G.O.P.,” New York Times (June 4).

6 See Haas, M. 2014 Russia and allies towards post-2014 Afghanistan, East West Institute Report, Brussels.

7 See McDermott, R.N. 2013, Central Asian Security Post-2014: Perspectives in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, DIIS Report (12).

*Road Economic Belt* should be built. The details of this project are still a work-in-progress, but it would seem that the main focus is on breaking down political barriers and finding common interests. The SCO members would open up their transportation channels, promote trade facilitation, improve investment protection mechanisms, laws and enhance monetary circulation. The initiative was met with a positive response from the other member states. The SCO's Secretary-General Dmitry Mezentsev encouraged the member states to study the proposal carefully and find workable formats for joint cooperation.<sup>8</sup> The inclusion of Afghanistan within this Silk Road Economic Belt could lead to greater transregional engagement and improve its future options for development.

Russia has recently demonstrated its readiness to deepen its economic ties with China by signing a 30-year multi-billion dollar gas deal in May 2014. It is expected that Russia will deliver some 38 billion cubic metres of natural gas a year, starting in 2018. Some analysts have predicted that the Kremlin will use this deal for political leverage *vis-à-vis* Beijing, but considering China's successful diversification of its energy portfolio in recent years, such a scenario appears to be unlikely. To the contrary, the signing of this contract—10 years in the making—has further reinforced the resolve of the member states to collaborate bilaterally first, then seek to further improve their economic ties within the framework of the SCO.

President Vladimir Putin recently approved a 'Plan for Russia's SCO Presidency 2014–2015', which set the goal of enhancing economic cooperation within the SCO space. An organizing committee was established in 2012 to prepare both Russia's SCO Presidency and the hosting of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) summit in the city of Ufa in 2015. Russia is placing symbolic importance on these events, having organized the very first BRICS (BRIC as it was then) meeting in Yekaterinburg in 2009. Back then, the SCO and BRICS summits and presidencies took place in the wake of the Russian intervention in Georgia in 2008, with the stated focus of both institutions being to demand a

“greater voice and representation in international financial institutions,” and to create a joint funding mechanism for development and aid. The most recent BRICS negotiations have dealt with the establishment of a development bank and the issue of a pool of currency reserves. This pool would be created to aid BRICS members and as a response to the problem of the depleted resources of the International Monetary Fund, often used to “saving the euro one day and another day—the national currencies of developed countries,” as noted by the Russian Foreign Ministry's Ambassador-at-Large Vadim Lukov.<sup>9</sup>

For the SCO member states, stronger economic cooperation, underpinned by the efforts of Russia and China within BRICS, is important because they all stand to benefit from such projects. However, all the plans for economic cooperation are highly dependent on how the security situation on the ground evolves from the end of 2014 onwards. Some political elites in Central Asia have been calling for more a pro-active approach to regional security and support for existing frameworks, such as the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). During the fourth CICA summit in Shanghai, on May 20–21, the Uzbek President Islam Karimov remarked that recent developments in Ukraine had been worrisome and could have an impact on its ongoing border disputes (interstate disputes with its neighbors within the Ferghana Valley: Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). While the Kazakh President, Nursultan Nazarbaev suggested creating an Organization for Security and Development in Asia, as an equivalent and alternative to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, in order to tackle the regional security issues.

In light of the unwillingness of all parties (regional and external) to commit to joint practical solutions, the SCO member states will most likely find themselves confronted with a more volatile region after the NATO/US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Given this scenario, it will be pertinent for all SCO member states to act coherently and treat regional security and stability as their first priority, as only then can regional economic cooperation thrive.

#### *About the Author*

Dr. Alica Kizekova is the Head of Asian Studies Department at the Metropolitan University Prague, the Czech Republic. She holds an Honorary Adjunct Research Fellowship at the Center for East-West Cultural & Economic Studies at Bond University, Queensland, Australia. She is currently revising a book manuscript entitled *Soft Balancing in the Indo-Asia-Pacific: from ASEAN to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*. Email: kizekova@mup.cz

8 Xiaob, S. 2014 “SCO ‘active’ in seeking solution for Afghan security problems,” Global Times (February 14).

9 “BRICS development bank, currency reserve pool to begin work in 2015,” Russia & India Report (April 12, 2014).



**ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST**

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Research Centre for East European Studies • Publications Department • Klagenfurter Str. 3 • 28359 Bremen • Germany

Phone: +49 421-218-69600 • Telefax: +49 421-218-69607 • e-mail: [fsopr@uni-bremen.de](mailto:fsopr@uni-bremen.de) • Internet: <[www.css.ethz.ch/rad](http://www.css.ethz.ch/rad)>