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The CIS and the Caucasus

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Conclusions

- Russia initially viewed the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as an artificial organization. But, since 1993, elements of the Russian government have tried to use the CIS as a vehicle for the voluntary reintegration of the former Soviet republics.

- Moscow is promoting the CIS as a regional peacekeeping organization, seeking recognition as a UN Chapter VIII Regional Organization, similar to the Organization of American States.

- International acceptance of the CIS as a regional organization has been hampered by Russia's dominance of the organization. The CIS is seen as a cover for Moscow's imperial intentions.

- International recognition of the CIS is also hampered by the fact that most of its member states are still struggling to establish their sovereignty. Until more CIS member states are viable, the international character of the organization will be questioned.

- The states of the Caucasus region have different views regarding membership in a regional organization. Armenia and Georgia are favorably disposed, in prinicple, towards membership, but they have discrete reservations about their relationship with the CIS. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, anticipates its oil riches will allow it to return to its former golden days and has reservations about joining any regional organization.

- All the states of the Caucasus are suspicious of Moscow's intentions towards the region. Commonwealth or Empire

The Russian Federation is caught between conflicting pressures and memories: trying to construct a viable post-Communist society and government while also attempting to sort out its relations with the outside world. The importance (to the West) of a successful Russian transition to a normal, status quo power is so great that it behooves the West not to prejudge either Moscow's intentions or actions. Traditional skepticism of its's motives, and the pursuit of prejudiced policies could contribute to the failure of the transition process.

One priority area for Moscow-and therefore a potential litmus test for observers-is how it deals with its neighbors, the successor states to the USSR. Many Russians want to return these "neighbors"-what they call the "Near Abroad"-to the fold. They are, however, faced both with questions of how to do so and

how to define the new relationship. The other successor states naturally view Moscow's interest in reintegration with mixed interest and suspicion-as do many Western observers.

A major instrument for Russian Federation policy on this question appears to be the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Moscow touts the CIS as a natural development-based on history, common interest, and mutual consent-by which many of the successor states can be reintegrated into a more or less coherent regional space. There are two aspects to this policy which merit close watching: first, the degree of success in reintegrating the region; second, the character of the institutional result. For the West, final judgment of the effort will depend upon three factors:

- the degree of mutual consent by which the process is pursued;
- the degree of mutual advantage shared by the participants, especially the smaller nations;
- the degree to which the CIS permits politicial, economic, and social interaction with outsiders (such as the United States).

The import of the CIS' development is enormous. Its evolving character will tell much about the evolving character of the new Russian Federation. The Caucasus Region provides an excellent window through which Moscow's intentions may be observed. The three Cauca-sian republics-Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan-share geography, historical experiences as part of the Soviet Union, the disparity of power between themselves and Russia, and a desire to maintain their newly found independence. However, their individual national interests are not the same, and their perspectives on the region's immediate neighbors (Russia, Turkey, and Iran) vary considerably. Russia's interests in this area are long-standing and, apart from any left-over imperial memeories, include a geographical security buffer, economic ties, trade, and petroleum. Whether the CIS is to be a Commonwealth or an Empire therefore, we should see the first signs relatively early in the Caucasus.

The View From Moscow

The CIS was conceived by Russia in December 1991 as a successor institution to the USSR. It failed to take any meaningful form until 1993 when Russia began operations in Georgia and Azerbaijan. Since then, official Russian interest in the reintegration of the USSR successor states has solidified into a policy-under Foreign Minister Yevgsnii Primakov-of seeking influence rather than reinstating rule. Russian diplomats now describe the CIS as both a process and an institution for the reintegration of the former states of the Soviet Union into a new politico-economic-social space. They claim that even without the institution the process is underway, and will eventually lead to a reintegrated regional entity based on the following realities:

- Economic: The USSR was an integrated economy built on the organizing principal of "no duplication" of economic activities; few if any of the successor states are yet able to pursue an independent economic life.
- Security: The USSR had centralized military institutions, and the CIS states are now forced to build their own institutions from scratch, at enormous cost.
- Common heritage: There is a vast common heritage of language, customs, bureaucratic cultures, memories (e.g. of the Great Patriotic War) etc.

- Borders: The complex border situation (between Russia and the other successor states; between the others and the external world; and between Russia and the external world) makes reintegration more difficult. The internal borders of the USSR were rather casual affairs, and its break-up left Russia without clearly demarcated borders with many of its neighbors, especially in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The political problems connected with clearly establishing borders, e.g. between Russia and Georgia, are reportedly vexing.

The transformation of the former USSR's border regions into independent states also leaves Russia without a geographic security buffer. The limited capability of these states to control the movement of goods, services and people within or across their borders, creates numerous economic, social, political, and security problems for Russia. To deal with this disturbing openess, Moscow has pressed for bilateral agreements to deploy Russian border troops (which include a large number of recruits from the host countries) to Georgia's and Armenia's borders with Turkey and Iran.

Moscow is attempting to use the CIS to deal with local conflicts in the Caucasus area itselfCin Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabagh. Russian military leaders had hoped that the CIS would provide the format for a unified regional (read Russian-controlled) military structure, but the other CIS members were unwilling to go along with this prospect. War in Azerbaijan, and instability in Georgia and other CIS countries, allowed Russia to introduce "peace maintenance forces" into the CIS agreement. These forces are deployed in Georgia and Moldova and are composed almost entirely of Russians. Moscow has indicated interest in further CIS peacekeeping operations in the region.

In sum, Russian officials argue that existing "objective" factors will lead to some form of reintegration-which they insist is not a cover for re-establishing the USSR's imperial nature. The issue surfaced in Russian internal politics in March, 1996 when the Communist-dominated State Duma passed a resolution declaring invalid the dissolution of the USSR in December 1991. Boris Yelstin turned this action of the Duma against the Communists in the electoral campaign by making the case that he was more able to bring about some form of reintegration of the former republics than were the Communists, in the form of a consensual CIS.

The View From "South of the Border"

The Caucasus is imbedded in a complex geopolitical matrix. At one level there is the intricate, intimate, and occasionally conflict-ridden relationship between the peoples of Caucasus region-primarily the secessionist movements of the Abkhaz and the South Ossetians of Georgia, the Armenians of Nakorno-Karabagh in Azerbaijan-and the peoples of the Russian Federation across the border in the Trans-Caucasus (most notably the Czechens). At another level there is the interplay between Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan (and their various peoples) and the surrounding layer of major regional powers-Russia, Turkey, and Iran-all of whom have exercised sovereignty in the region.

The novelty of Caucasian independence is matched by the passion for trying to keep it, but the fragility of the newly independent economies and institutions combined with geographic isolation poses problems. For various reasons none of them can cavalierly reject the Russian offer of a new and more equal relationship which Moscow claims is the purpose of the CISC reasons which range from still existing economic ties, through political pressure, to a perceived need to use Russia as a counterpoint to Turkey or Iran.

In essence, Russia's partners in the CIS, with the exception of Belarus, are leery of turning the Common-wealth into a military control mechanism such as the Warsaw Treaty Organization. While

accepting the necessity of maintaining or reinstituting some economic ties, they are attempting to limit the security relationship and demonstrate political independence. Ukraine pursues Western security arrangements to counter- balance those with Moscow, and other CIS countries have similiar policies. All have signed Partnership for Peace agreements. Even the bilateral agreements that Russia has procured in the Caucasus, such as the Russian-Armenian and Russian-Georgian bilateral treaties, insist on national sovereignty, and the treaties allowing Russian forces to be based in CIS countries (such as Georgia, Armenia, and Tajikistan) permit indigenous personnel to join those units in significant numbers. A major Russian CIS initiative is the effort to obtain security treaties, but those few signed to date have lacked substance. These states understand that they either still need or cannot do without Russia. This situation offers numerous political opportunities for Moscow.

Armenia: CIS an Opportunity and a Danger

The Armenian Government is focused on four foreign policy issues:

- The future of Nakorno-Karabagh and relations with Azerbaijan
- Establishing relations with its other neighbors, especially Turkey but also Georgia and Iran
- How to break out of economic as well as political isolation
- The character of the CIS, and Armenia's role in it.

Armenia sees the CIS as both an opportunity and a danger. It offers the prospect of an acceptable relationship with Russia, which Armenia needs for security reasons, i.e. to maintain Russian sympathy in the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict and, in the longer run, to counter the "Turkish Threat." The Nagorno-Karabagh question is particularly important for the Armenian government which wants to concentrate on nation-building tasks but is caught between a more militant political movement (the Dashnak party) and the Nakorno-Karabagh regime. This conflict raises all sorts of internal and international problems for the Armenian Government which finds itself isolated both economicly and politically. Moscow's continued sympathy and potential for assistance in resolving these problems is important for Yerevan .

Yerevan has signed a number of Moscow's CIS proposals, and has even had to accept the stationing of Russian troops. However, Moscow also wants the CIS to have an economic component, which Armenia sees as a potential trap to draw it back into an all-encompassing economic partnership with Russia, which Yerevan views as a low-wage, low-profit, uncompetitive economic zone. Armenia wants, instead, to break out into the wider, high-tech global economy. How to get the one while avoiding the other is Yerevan's primary long-term foreign policy problem.

Azerbaijan: A Reluctant Participant

Azerabaijan resisted joining the CIS until late 1993 when internal instability (some say Russian-fomented) and defeat in the war in Nakorno-Karabagh produced economic as well as political chaos. Azerbaijan is opposed to the concept of reintegration among the former states of the USSR, but joined the CIS under Russian pressure and with the Russian promise that in doing so it could it obtain Russian assistance in resolving the Nakorno-Karabagh problem. However, because CIS membership has not produced any noticeable or significant change in Russian policy with respect to the Nakorno-Karabagh situation, Azerbaijani participation in the CIS has been less than enthusiastic. They

have refused to sign most CIS agreements; especially those relating to security and the deployment of "CIS" border troops in Azerbaijani territory.

Baku has resisted Moscow's suggestions for a CIS peacekeeping force in Nakorno-Karabagh-absent a negotiated agreement-and attempted to pre-empt this proposal by turning to the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) (e.g. the electoral monitoring mission in late 1995). The Azeraijan Government has tried to foster Western ties by proposing participation in the Partnership for Peace, raising the idea of NATO peacekeeping during a presidential visit to Brussels in April 1996.

The wild card in the deck of Azerbaijan-Russian-CIS relations is petroleum. The 1994 petroleum agreement momentarily settled various questions of investment, exploitation, and exports but major questions, including the legal regime for the Caspian Sea remain. Azerbaijan is focused on obtaining meaningful, viable political and economic independence (from Russia, without falling into any Iranian trap) and it sees its petroleum prospects as the key to obtaining and maintaining that desire.

Georgia: Forced Participation

Georgia was essentially dragooned into the CIS in 1994 following an initial period of post-independence instability; instability most observers believe was fostered by RussiaCor by individual Russian officials operating independently. Historical and ethnic factors combined with contemporary politics produced a de facto division of Georgia and a cease fire by early 1995. The cease fire is monitored by a complex, multilateral set of peace operations mounted by several international organizations: the UN, OSCE, and the CIS. Although little progress was made throughout 1995 and the first half of 1996, several recent actions have improved the integration and effectiveness of the overall operation:

- The U.N. Secretary-General appointed an experienced Deputy Special Envoy who speaks relevant languages, to reside in the area and double as head of the UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG);

- Georgian President Edward Shevardnadize won last November's election, thereby significantly strengthening his efforts to stabilize the country;

- The UN Security Council extended UNOMIG's mandate, and the CIS extended the mandate of the CIS Peacekeeping Force;

- The January 19, 1996 CIS Council of Heads of State meeting agreed (responding to a Georgian initiative) on a much tougher policy towards the Abkhaz authorities.

- The Abkhaz leader Vladislav Aridzinba announced a new position accepting the principal of a "Federate Union" (undefined).

These developments enhanced the peacekeeping and regional organization credentials of the CIS. Russian Foreign Minister Primakov chaired meetings in February 1996 between the disputants in Moscow, although without any particular success. Only a few weeks later, the Russian Minister of Defense suggested that Russian willingness to continue to provide a peacekeeping force in Abkhazia might soon come to an end. (The Czechen situation has obviously eroded Russian interest in Abkhaz separatism). The lifting of the CIS (read Russian) shield could result in the withdrawl of UNOMIG, leaving the 70,000 Abkhaz to face Shevard-nadize's resurgent Georgia. There were reports that Russian forces had shifted their positions in a manner that "uncovered" much of the southern Abkhaz area and

the Georgian government has begun infiltrating numbers of armed personnel into the area. It is unclear which way Russian policy is going in Georgia.

Georgia would prefer to avoid a tight security embrace by Russia but finds itself in need of Russian assistance in a number of areas-apart from the obvious economic and transportation ties. The CIS peacekeeping force in Abkhazia is completely Russian and Moscow must be a party to any solution of the Abkhaz secession. Russia continues to play the role of mediator in the South Ossetian problem, most recently evidenced by the latest accord signed by the two parties in May 1996. Russia maintains troops in Georgia in three distinct categories: border troops on the Turkish border, a regular garrison, and the CIS peacekeeping force. Georgia hopes to cut itself into Azerbaijani's oil future and this also may require Russian support. So, while Tsiblisi may see Moscow as part, if not the sole source of most of its problems, it also sees Russia as a necessary participant in the solution of those very same problems.

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