

Lösch, Dieter

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CIS – Cooperation à la Carte

December 1996 marked the fifth anniversary of the founding of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). On 21 December 1991 in Alma Ata eight former Soviet republics joined the treaty establishing the CIS which had been concluded by Russia, the Ukraine and Belarus two weeks before in Minsk (neither the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, nor Georgia were in attendance, but the latter joined the CIS later). The signatory states pledged to cooperate in politics, economics, culture, education, health, environment, science, trade and humanitarian issues. Thirteen months later the CIS statute was adopted establishing the Council of Heads of State as the supreme body of the CIS, and charging the Council of the Heads of Government with the task of coordinating the executive organs of the member states. In both councils decisions are taken in consensus; any member can, however, declare its lack of interest in a given issue. A Consultative Committee with a Secretariat was set up in Minsk as a permanent executive and liaison body to which the member states have accredited representatives.

Over the last five years the CIS has displayed a great deal of activity, mostly at Russian instigation: 20 summits and numerous ministerial conferences have been held, an interparliamentary assembly and an international economic committee established and over 600 protocols, framework agreements and bilateral and multilateral accords signed in diverse policy fields. The conferences have borne little tangible fruit, however, and the agreements – not infrequently signed only by some of the members and in part overlapping or even contradicting each other – have not been implemented. Even the CIS statute was not signed by three members (Moldavia, Turkmenistan, Ukraine). The phased introduction of an economic union, which had been agreed upon (without the participation of the Ukraine and Tajikistan) has so far not even been completed beyond the first stage, a customs union. It foundered upon the differing pace of systemic reform in the member states.

Though the Russian Federation redoubled its efforts last year to step up CIS cooperation, there is no evidence whatever to support the oft-repeated view that the CIS is moving towards a confederation. Equally false, though, is the claim made by former Ukrainian President Kravchuk that the CIS is a mere fiction, little more than a collective term for the successor states to the Soviet Union remaining within the sphere of Russian influence after the withdrawal of the Baltic states.

At least, the CIS provided the framework for a fairly “decent divorce”, i.e. a more or less orderly shareout of the assets and liabilities of the Soviet Union and an undertaking to respect the latter’s obligations under international law. Its major achievement is to have largely averted a Yugoslavia-type disaster. But it is difficult to achieve divorce and integration at the same time and with the aid of the same mechanisms. The CIS still suffers today from the innate contradiction resulting from these opposing tendencies. In this sense, the title given to the cooperation between the ex-Soviet republics is a misnomer. The CIS is not a “commonwealth”, it is not a subject in terms of international law, it wields no interna-

tional powers. It is also more than doubtful whether its members are "independent". Their historical ties with Russia, its security interests and overt aspirations to hegemony as well as the presence of Russian minorities and Russian troops inevitably place narrow constraints on their political options; their characterization as "nearby foreign countries", reminiscent of the Breshnev doctrine, clearly reflects this.

There are both centrifugal and centripetal forces working within the CIS. Most CIS states depend heavily on Russia financially and economically, which is why they are all the more fearful that Russia could try to use the CIS to restore the Russian empire – not just since the Duma resolution to reinstate the Soviet Union – and this has a paralysing effect on their readiness to cooperate within the CIS framework. The hegemonial power Russia is itself faced with secessionist movements by non-Russian peoples who already belonged to Russia under the Tsars and who were part of the Russian Soviet Republic under the Soviet Union. So it is all the more understandable that most of the Muslim Turkic peoples of the previous Caucasian and Central Asian Soviet Republics who were not "colonized" until the last century are keen to uphold the independence gained after the demise of the USSR. Even in the Ukraine, populated by Slavs with a large Greater Russian minority and beset with open territorial disputes, which was once a key country in the Russian empire, there are long-term aspirations to join the EU and even NATO.

Against this backdrop, then, it is hardly surprising that Russia's efforts to (re)integrate CIS members are proceeding both at "different speeds" and "à la carte". On the one hand there are three groups of countries that can be classified by their readiness to cooperate: at the heart of the CIS we have the partners Russia and Belarus, whose presidents recently reiterated their intention of full reunification; then there is the "Community of Integrated States" based largely on common economic interests, which includes Kazakhstan and Kirgizia in addition to the first two; last come the other eight members that are reluctant or even unwilling to cooperate in the CIS and have so far always collaborated with the Community of Integrated States only at the level of the lowest common denominator. An à la carte cooperation takes place in the sense that single countries or entire groups of member states simply keep away from the multilateral treaties.

The CIS is a product of historical facts that have indeed been conducive to the cooperation of its members, such as the spread of Russian as lingua franca, the interlinked transport infrastructure and in part complementary economic structures, but the differences amongst the former Soviet republics far outweigh what they share in common. The location and size of the CIS countries and their progress in development and reform differ so much that the prospective gains of economic integration beyond a free trade zone are by no means obvious. Depending what practical shape such integration takes, it will appear disadvantageous either to the more developed core countries or the less developed peripheral ones. The geopolitical interests and cultural affinities of the twelve CIS states are also not exactly such that they predestine those states to close cooperation.

With all these various factors playing a role, no-one can tell what the future may hold for the CIS. A major determinant will certainly be internal political developments in the member states themselves. For powerful forces in Russia the restoration of the Russian empire is more than just a heartfelt wish. After the experience of the Chechen war, however, it is quite unlikely that Russia might try to integrate the CIS states more closely by force. As voluntary integration seems no less improbable for the above reasons, we can expect new forms of cooperation to emerge on the former territory of the USSR. At present, the geography and intensity of these relations are impossible to predict.

Dieter Lösch