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State of Disunion

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The biting criticism of the Commonwealth of Independent States at the October 1997 Kishinev summit flowed naturally from the March 1997 Moscow summit, where most of the presidents of the CIS states declared the commonwealth to be a sterile structure, incapable of resolving the problems it faced. Most analysts predicted there would be renewed attacks on the CIS in Kishinev. The summit, however, exceeded all expectations. Almost every Russian paper characterized the Kishinev summit as demoralizing, and one newspaper wrote that Boris Yel'tsin was crushed by the harsh criticism from his colleagues.

The discussions were held behind closed doors, which was most likely intended to conceal from public view the conflicts brewing inside. Nevertheless, a Kommersant Daily correspondent learned the details of the proceedings from an unnamed eyewitness. (1) Almost all of the participants were highly critical of the CIS in their presentations. Yel'tsin was not the only president to be attacked--the other presidents picked quarrels with each other as well as with the Russian president. Alyaksandr Lukashenka accused the other CIS members of failing to support Belarus at a time when his country was the subject of international pressure. In response, the Uzbek leader, Islam Karimov, let loose a diatribe against "internal unions" within the CIS. In his turn, the Kazakh president, Nursultan Nazarbaev, found fault with the entire commonwealth.

Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze made several statements that were, in this setting, completely unprecedented in their harshness. For instance, he declared that
"The Russian position and the position of the Russian Foreign Ministry on the Abkhaz question is categorically unacceptable to Georgia!" When the Russian foreign minister tried to explain the Russian position, Shevardnadze interrupted him with the following: "You have been repeating the same thing for five years. You are tricking us. Everything that has happened [to us], happened because of you!" In addition, Shevardnadze accused Russia of protecting the criminals who have tried to assassinate him. At first sight, it may have seemed that Shevardnadze was referring to the former director of the Presidential Security Service, Aleksandr Korzhakov, and the former chairman of the Federal Security Service, Mikhail Barsukov: Shortly before the summit, an article appeared in the Georgian press in which a person directly involved in the crimes pointed to Barsukov and Korzhakov as the planners of the terrorist acts. However, the person whose extradition Shevardnadze has requested by name is Igor Georgadze, the former Georgian security ministry chief, who is accused of high treason.

The main thrust of the accusations leveled against Moscow concerned its policy of provoking conflicts on the territory of the CIS, and its inability or unwillingness to undertake effective conflict resolution in the area. The glaring distrust of Moscow's "peacekeeping" initiatives at the Kishinev summit was emphasized further by the refusal on the part of every country except Tajikistan to entertain Viktor Chernomyrdin's proposal for creating a CIS committee on conflict situations.

In that vein, the Azeri foreign minister called the Russian-Armenian mutual assistance treaty a military alliance and invited the summit to condemn it. The Azeri president reminded Yeltsin of revelations made in February 1997 regarding the secret transfer of arms worth $1 billion to Armenia by Russian authorities. When the Russian president responded by saying that he "removed many Russian military leaders for this," he did not sound particularly convincing. The persons most responsible for that scandal--the former Russian defense minister, Pavel Grachev, and the former chief of the General Staff, Mikhail Kolesnikov--were relieved of their duties for entirely different reasons.
Has the Russian leadership developed any new direction for its policies towards the CIS in the face of growing and ubiquitous disenchantment on the part of the CIS member states? The paper Moskovskie novosti published a startling hypothesis: The scandal at the Kishinev summit was provoked deliberately by Yel'tsin. The paper claims that Yel'tsin brought with him to Kishinev not only a revised speech but also a revised tactic. (2) According to unnamed sources in the Kremlin, the Russian leadership has decided to make substantial changes in its policy towards the CIS member states. The fundamental approach of the new policy consists of the idea that Russia cannot afford to tolerate public displays of disloyalty and will punish such actions harshly. Moscow will continue to promote mutually beneficial deals, for instance, a trade concession for a political favor. However, attempts to use economic means as leverage on Russia for political advantage or vice versa will no longer be tolerated. In regard to free trade, Moscow has concluded that, at this stage of its development, Russia cannot afford to engage in free trade even with its most loyal partners unless Russia derives substantial financial advantages from the free-trade regime.

It is possible that this policy was developed before the Kishinev summit, which served to flush out the disloyal CIS members. It is also possible that it was written and publicized after the summit to alleviate the negative results of the meeting. In either case, at a recent press conference Vice Premier Valentin Serov confirmed that Russia plans to push for major revisions of the CIS structure. Serov indicated that Russian policymakers are engaged in a fundamental re-evaluation of Russia’s relations with the CIS countries. "It is time to proceed from words to specific actions," Serov told the journalists assembled. Moscow is planning major revisions of the CIS organs, such as rewriting their charters, developing new regulations, and redistributing responsibilities. (3)

Part of the impetus for revitalizing the CIS comes from the growing influence of the West in the CIS member countries. According to Serov, it is no longer a secret that the US is gaining influence in Central Asia while several other foreign states are entering into very close relations with Caspian countries.
Of course, Russian "neoimperialism" can hardly be considered a new feature of Russian foreign policy. Since perestroika, the Soviet center and then the Russian leadership employed all kinds of measures to pressure the republics to submit to Moscow. The words uttered by the chairman of the Supreme Soviet USSR, Anatoli Lukyanov, to Moldovan President Mircea Snegur in 1991 have become axiomatic: "If you don't want separatism in the Transdniestra, sign the Union Treaty!" (4)

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union the new Kremlin leaders continued to employ the tactics of their predecessors. The Russian leaders helped the Abkhaz separatists in their assault on Sukhumi, and halted that attack only when Shevardnadze agreed to accept Russian military bases on Georgian territory. During the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia furnished military aid to both sides, hoping to keep both Armenia and Azerbaijan in its sphere of influence. Perhaps the most candid statement of this policy came from the chairman of the foreign relations committee of the Duma, Konstantin Zatulin, who in a 1993 interview with the author stated: "The countries of the near abroad are doomed to become our satellites, otherwise they will perish." To be fair, we should regard this shockingly frank comment as an overstatement, because in many respects Russian foreign policy continues to lack coordination between the various departments involved.

The scandal of the Kishinev summit suggests that Moscow has used up the old methods of exerting influence without creating new forms of political capital. Moscow's policy towards the CIS member states could be characterized as the politics of "divide and rule": Russia promised to liquidate separatist threats (Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, and Transdniestra in Moldova) in return for the countries' submission to Moscow. This principle is no longer reliable, as the Azeri and Georgian presidents made amply clear in Kishinev. Aliiev and Shevardnadze have grown weary of waiting for Russia to fulfill its promises to them. The plausibility of Russia resolving conflicts in the CIS area continues to diminish and other countries are beginning to take on the role of broker and peacekeeper. In
managing the resolution of the Transdniestra conflict, Moscow now has parity with Kiev and Kishinev, which effectively prevents Russia from dictating the rules.

In fact, there are only two countries in the CIS where Russia can maintain its influence using the old methods. In Tajikistan, the current government owes its existence to the presence of Russian military forces. Similarly, Moscow maintains its influence over Armenia, which remains a recipient of Russian military assistance under the recently concluded mutual assistance treaty. However, even in these cases Moscow's success is rather dubious because these countries are the poorest, and the most devoid of natural resources in the CIS.

The export of Caspian oil to foreign markets promises to diminish substantially Russia's leverage over the Caucasus. Baku makes no secret of its preference to route the bulk of the oil through Georgia and Turkey, avoiding Russian pipelines. Baku and Tbilisi hold the well-founded view that the Western capital involved in the "deal of the century" is by far more likely to contribute to a resolution of the region's territorial disputes than Russia. It stands to reason that if the Western companies showed a similar interest in Armenia (if, for instance, the pipeline was routed through Armenia), that country too would cease to align itself with Russia.

Even Kazakhstan, a traditional Russian ally, is reorienting its economic foreign relations to the West. As the director for political research of the Kazakhstani Institute of Development told me recently: "Proceeding from the fact that Kazakhstan has a long border with Russia and that its population is one-half Slav, Alma-Ata had planned to rely primarily on Russia as a trade partner. In practice this is ineffective, the majority of our economic agreements with Moscow cannot be implemented. Given this situation, the leadership of the country cannot but seek alternatives to Moscow."

Despite Russia's efforts, maintaining its influence over the CIS states is becoming increasingly problematic. Having squandered its resources in the region, Moscow faces a situation where only the CIS countries with the fewest prospects of obtaining
patronage from the West are willing to be its allies. Although Russian policymakers are aware of this tendency there is no indication that their re-evaluation of the CIS structures will address the fundamental failures of their neoimperial policies toward the CIS member states.

NOTES:


2 Moskovskije novosti, no. 43, 26 October-2 November 1997.

3 Nezavisimaya gazeta, 2 December 1997.

4 See, for example, Rotar, Igor, "Crimea, Abkhazia and the Dnestr Region," Nezavisimaya gazeta, 3 March 1994

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