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Will GUUAM and EEC Bury the CIS?

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Unexpectedly, Romania recently made known its keen interest in expanding its cooperation with the GUUAM association, which is currently comprised of Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova. Shortly after the Millennium summit in September 2000, leaders of the GUUAM countries reacted positively to the initiatives from Bucharest. As one of the active participants of the TRACECA project, Romania's decision to join the association indicates certain assumptions concerning GUUAM's potential. The association can encompass additional European members, bringing these five CIS states closer to NATO. As Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinsky remarked in a recent interview, "This organization's door shall stay open for other countries also - Turkey, Bulgaria, Poland." (4)

GUUAM, which was created as an instrument for restoring the ancient Silk Road trade route and as a response to revisions in the CFE treaty, (5) had indicated that it sought stronger security cooperation with NATO. Moreover, GUUAM provides a forum for discussion on various levels of existing security problems, including the promotion of conflict resolution and elimination of risks and threats to security. The five member states have been coordinating their positions in international fora such as the UN and OSCE.

In recent months there has been a substantial upsurge in activity aimed at building an institutional structure. Such measures include the founding of a standing committee comprised of representatives from all of the member states and an economic coordination council which is developing a plan of action for 2001. Meetings among the members have been more frequent and well attended; the most recent event was held
on 26 November at the level of foreign minister in Vienna. At the Vienna Ministerial Conference of the OSCE, the GUUAM countries issued a joint statement and met as a group with the US secretary of state. The statement of the GUUAM calls on Russia to honor its obligations to remove military bases from Moldova and Georgia and reminded OSCE members of these and other concerns - Russia’s abysmal record on peacekeeping and the obligation to maintain the territorial integrity of OSCE members chief among them. The failure of the OSCE conference to endorse these goals only emphasizes the need for greater cohesion among GUUAM members. In this regard, a GUUAM summit is planned to be held in Kyiv in the first quarter of next year. That event promises to institutionalize common policy coordination in foreign and economic policy.

While GUUAM has very real potential, it also faces serious challenges which are rooted in the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the member states. Moldova is paralyzed by Russia’s continued intransigence in refusing to comply with OSCE-Russian agreements on the removal of Russian forces from Transdniestra. Uzbekistan is deeply involved in the struggle against Islamic movements, in which it feels some dependence on Russia. Ukraine is increasingly unassertive, having been confronted by the specter of an oil pipeline potentially bypassing Ukrainian territory and having dismissed its pro-Western foreign minister. Azerbaijan is preoccupied with internal struggles stemming from contested election results which have led to demonstrations and clashes. Like Moldova, Georgia is trying to persuade a recalcitrant Russia to carry out its promises to withdraw forces from Georgian territory. Moreover, Eduard Shevardnadze’s government is held hostage by the Russian-sponsored separatist movements in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Adjaria, and by (probably Russian-inspired) attempts on Shevardnadze’s life. Georgia is also constrained by Russia’s imposition of a visa regime, which has not been levied against other CIS countries, but is being used as a lever against Georgian efforts to obtain the removal of Russia military bases.

Russia’s ability to exploit these weaknesses was revealed in an even more overt way when the self-styled “foreign ministers” of the separatist regions, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transdniestra publicly announced their intention to
coordinate policies vis-à-vis the states to which they belong. The representatives of these entities held a meeting to coordinate a common policy and issue a joint statement denouncing the GUUAM institutionalization efforts. The positions outlined in the joint statement bore an uncanny resemblance to the positions set out by Yevgeni Primakov during his tenure as Russian Foreign Minister which have developed a second life when Primakov was appointed the Kremlin's point man for the Transdniestra region.

In October, representatives of several CIS states led by Russia met in Astana and decided to transform the CIS Customs Union into the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC), in a move viewed partly as a response to GUUAM. The leaders of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus and Tajikistan agreed to establish a new organization to support process of "real integration in the former Soviet space." (6) According to Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev - the temporary chairman of this organization - the headquarters of the EEC would be located both in Moscow and in Almaty. Its first heads of states meeting has been scheduled to take place in Minsk on 1 September 2001. The establishment of the Russian-led EEC formalizes the division that has developed within the CIS. In effect, the members have separated into two camps, in accordance with their national security, economic and foreign policy orientation. Thus, we have the Western-oriented GUUAM against the Russian-oriented EEC. Does this fragmentation signal the beginning of the collapse of the CIS? If the situation develops in line with present trends, such a scenario is possible.

Since the establishment of GUUAM in 1997, the main idea was to replace the nebulous concept of CIS cooperation with an alternate organization which could be more functional and based on the priorities of the countries involved. These priorities were defined as: opposition to aggressive separatism and regional conflicts; development of the Eurasian and Transcaucasian transportation corridors; support for the fundamental norms and principles of international law, including respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence and internationally recognized borders of states; and integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. Officially, GUUAM members have declared that the association is not targeted against Russia or any other country. However, the very fact...
that it has been set up demonstrates the dissatisfaction of these countries with the CIS and with Russia in particular. During the summit held in Washington DC, the member states agreed to continue consultations on establishing a joint peacekeeping unit and to develop close military cooperation. The purpose of the proposed unit would be to protect territorial security and pipelines and to conduct peacekeeping operations.

The five countries of the association share common economic, security and regional interests, not least of which is a need to restrain Russia's moves toward unification of the CIS. There are three major interests which serve as the basis for the association. The first goal is to oppose aggressive separatism which threatens the national security of GUUAM states. This involves the close cooperation within different international organizations as well as potential military cooperation among the member countries. Furthermore, the proposed cooperation against separatism has a perceptible anti-Russian subtext: In Moldova and Ukraine, the greatest threat of separatism is from Russians in Transdniestr and Crimea, while Georgians rightly regard Russia as the main sponsor of the Abkhaz separatists. Azerbaijan, too, has felt the effects of separatists in Nagorno-Karabakh, where Russia has supplied the Armenian side with weapons and security guarantees. Russia uses these separatists movements to restrain the ambitions of the GUUAM members to craft independent foreign policies and to hold them hostage to Russian manipulation.

The second incentive for the alliance is to coordinate the economic interests of GUUAM countries. Most of them are already involved in different international projects such as "The Great Silk Road," TRACECA, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, etc. Thus, members are encouraged to cooperate with each other to reduce tariffs in interstate economic relations and also to seek international financial support to implement these projects. Most of the members view these projects not only as a means of expanding economic cooperation, but also as an important factor in strengthening their economic and political independence.
The third incentive is the pro-Western orientation adopted by most of the GUUAM countries. In the long run, their goal is membership in such organizations as the EU, NATO and the WEU. This goal remains far off, however, since to join these organizations, the GUUAM countries would have to remove all semblance of Russian hegemonic power and change the image of a Russian-dominated security perimeter. For instance, the very term "near abroad" which reflects this concept is unacceptable for several countries such as Georgia, Azerbaijan, Moldova and, certainly, Ukraine. None of them wishes to be associated with Russia in this manner, which would close the door to integration into European political structures.

It is also in the interests of most of these countries to foster economic development, which can serve as their entrance ticket into European supranational institutions. In short, these countries see their future in close integration with Europe and the establishment of a "special partnership and dialogue with NATO on issues of mutual interest." (7) While GUUAM is drawing up a Western-oriented security agenda, the West has not been inactive. The US allocated $45,000,000 for GUUAM countries in order to improve cooperation among them and to initiate structural changes within the organization.

All these proceedings contradict the Russian ambition to regain superpower status. Russia is trying to mold the CIS into the geopolitical successor to the USSR, with Moscow at its head. Russia has treated the former Soviet republics as indispensable members of this new union. It is viewed as unacceptable by Russia that the so-called "near abroad" states should join any other structure outside Russian influence.

The new groupings in the CIS could prove to be the gravedigger for the commonwealth. While the five EEC states are enthusiastic about Moscow-coordinated "integration" initiatives within the CIS, GUUAM has indicated an alternate means of cooperation, bypassing Russia. GUUAM countries see the ineffectiveness and illusory character of the CIS. Islam Karimov, the president of Uzbekistan, said that one reason the CIS managed to make any decisions at all was that "everyone knows they will never be
implemented." (8) He also complained that the 2,000-person CIS bureaucracy in Moscow is doing nothing useful. Most of the GUUAM countries share this idea and are unwilling either to be part of a CIS customs union or the EEC, or subordinate to any CIS supranational bodies, or bound by any common security policy.

The CIS also failed in its "peacekeeping operations" in Georgia and Moldova. In Abkhazia, the Russian intervention under CIS cover undoubtedly made a peace settlement more difficult to achieve. Although there is no fighting currently, the Russian military presence there has made the Abkhaz less inclined to make peace, and has prevented hundreds of thousands of ethnic Georgian refugees from returning to their homes in Abkhazia. Tajikistan is perhaps the only place where Russia has had a reasonably successful peacekeeping mission.

Elsewhere, the chief effect of the interventions has been to increase Russian hegemony over its neighbors. Indeed, the problem facing the members of the CIS is that they both need and mistrust Russia. They need Russia as an economic partner, especially as a market and source of raw material or power. Moreover, in some cases they need Russia as a security partner, particularly in the case of the Central Asian republics. For instance, Uzbekistan is wavering in its commitment to GUUAM because of the threat of terrorist attacks and anti-governmental Islamic movements.

The countries of CIS differ not only in size, wealth, resources and culture but also in politics and national interest. Therefore, they have different foreign policy perspectives and aims. For instance Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, due to their distance from Europe, cannot afford to pursue a foreign policy completely independent of Russia. Thus, though they seek an active relationship with the US, the only way to communicate with Europe is via Russia. Of course it is also in Russia's interest to keep the rich strategic resources of these states under its control. Under these circumstances, Russian influence exceeds what is desirable for the CIS countries. The alternative to Russian influence is Muslim fundamentalism, which is unacceptable for Central Asian countries after what happened in Afghanistan. It was this threat that Russia cited when
initiating the Collective Security Agreement, which involves most of Central Asia. So it appears to be in the national interest of these countries to maintain stability through Russian military and political presence. (As far as Turkmenistan is concerned, specific conditions existing in that country are leading it towards political neutrality; however, close economic links with Russia cannot be avoided.)

Armenia faces a similar geopolitical dilemma. The country aims at European integration in the long run, but in the short run its national interest precludes serious Westward leanings. Armenia has seized large portions of Azeri territory and it has no access to the sea. Hence, without Russian support, especially military assistance, Armenia would have to give up its territorial conquests. To incorporate the Caucasus into European structures, Armenia must be persuaded to adopt a Western-oriented agenda. In this project Georgia could play a vital role.

Belarus lacks a clear national identity and its behavior remains erratic. Will it adopt a pro-European policy or stay under Russian influence? So far, under the dictatorial leadership of Alyaksandr Lukashenka, Belarusians are isolated from the West; still the fate of Belarus after Lukashenka is not clear. Ukraine could play an important role in changing the current orientation of Belarus and bringing this country into a common European house.

Russia has noticed that the CIS is in danger of falling apart entirely. However, since the Putin administration came into power, Moscow has retained the hope of keeping and even extending its diplomatic and economic hegemony. The demise of the CIS would constitute a major setback to national prestige and interest. It is precisely this view of the CIS as a vehicle for Russian interests that has tested the patience of other members. However, Russia has other instruments at its disposal. Chief among them are various bilateral arrangements such as basing rights, visa arrangements, and other forms of economic pressure that are applied to states on an individual basis to restrain their drift away from Russia's orbit.
Thus, it seems that the continued existence of the CIS as a meaningful body is under question. The commonwealth was created as a means of "civilized divorce" after the Soviet Union collapsed, but it has failed to turn into an effective equitable regional economic and security organization. The division already forming - with a Russian-centric group of Central Asian republics and perhaps Armenia and a pro-European grouping of GUUAM countries, perhaps minus Uzbekistan - seems more natural and viable. The putative membership in GUUAM of non-CIS countries such as Romania - now a candidate for NATO membership, pushed by France - gives GUUAM the opportunity to be significantly closer to the West. Whether the current weakness of GUUAM members undercuts such a development remains to be seen. The West, and particularly the US, should continue to support these countries in order to assist in the formation of regional political institutions, since they are long-term guarantors of stability and prosperity. By providing this kind of international assistance to strengthen democracy and nationhood, the security and welfare of the region can be ensured.

Notes:

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3. TRACECA, a program of the European Union stands for Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia and embodies many transportation projects covering roads, railroads, barges, and oil pipelines.

4. Interview with the author, 14 November 2000, Washington DC.
5. The 1997 revisions in the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty raised the ceilings on equipment in Russia's flank areas limited by the treaty. The states bordering the southern flank joined together in objecting to these revisions. This identification of shared interests eventually gave rise to the GUUAM grouping. In 1999, these ceilings were raised further to take into account Russian forces in Chechnya (in violation of the 1997 limits), but the Duma hasn't ratified the 1999 changes. - ed.


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