Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States: The Role of the CSCE

Michael R. Lucas

Introduction
Developments in Russia and other republics of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 1993-94 have disabused the world of the illusion that Boris Yeltsin, after triumphantly slaying the Soviet imperial dragon could triumphantly sweep Russia and the other new independent republics into the promised land of the international community on the waves of shock therapy, democracy, and human rights. Despite the epic advances in Russian reform since 1989, the world has had to accept that Russia is faced with increasing problems at home and is re-asserting what it sees as its national and regional great-power interests and responsibilities. As a result, the West faces a major policy dilemma: on the one hand, it cannot abandon or even politely ignore Russia in its moment of need without risking that Russia and the CIS region will slide into instability that could rapidly spread in all directions. On the other hand, the West cannot give Moscow unconditioned support in its current neo-imperial drive for stability and order without risking that Russia's progress toward democracy and rule of law, so painfully achieved since the birth of glasnost and perestroika, would be seriously if not fatally put at risk.

The purpose of this article is to address this security dilemma facing Russia, the CIS, and the West and the role of the CSCE as one of main arenas in which their efforts to cooperatively promote peace and the reform process throughout the CIS region are being played out.

I The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)
The CIS was originally set up by Russia, Belarus, and the Ukraine in early December, 1991, and was shortly thereafter expanded to include 11, and later 12, of the 15 republics of the former Soviet Union. According to the Minsk Agreement, signed by the three Slav heads of state, the CIS is a voluntary association of 12 states of the former Soviet Union. In the Alma-Ata Declaration, signed by 11 former Soviet republics, the signatory states agreed to

1. The member states of the CIS are: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan. The Minsk Agreement was signed by the heads of state of Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine on 8 December 1991. It was followed on 21 December 1991, by the Alma-Ata Declaration signed by 11 heads of state. Both these agreements and other documents related to setting up the CIS can be found in Europe World Yearbook 1993, vol. 1, London, Europa Publications Limited, 1993, pp. 112-116. On the founding of the CIS, see Ann Sheehy, 'Commonwealth of Independent States: An Uneasy Compromise', RFE/RL Report, vol. 1, no. 2, 10 January 1992, pp. 1-5.
'build democratic law-governed states, the relations between which will develop on the basis of mutual recognition and respect for self-determination, principles of equality and non-interference in the internal affairs, the rejection of the use of force, the threat of force and economic or any other methods of pressure, the peaceful settlement of disputes, respect for human rights and freedoms, including the rights of national minorities, a conscientious fulfilment of commitments and other generally recognized principles and standards of international law'.

Within a year of its establishment the CIS heads of state and government have signed approximately 200 agreements. This development should be interpreted with caution, since many of the agreements have not been implemented. Moreover, although the decision-making process is based on consensus, a republic also has the right to abstain from participation in an agreement if it declares that it is not interested in the subject of the treaty. Ukraine, Moldova, and Azerbaijan often made use of this option in the first months of the CIS and abstained, for example, from the proposed CIS military cooperation agreements, in order to be able to develop their own armed forces. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have consistently shown the strongest commitment to the Commonwealth, signing virtually all the CIS agreements and maintaining the strong cooperation ties with Moscow. Less committed in the first six months of the Commonwealth's existence were Armenia and Belarus, while Azerbaijan, Moldova, Ukraine, and Turkmenistan expressed even stronger reservations and refused to sign many of the CIS treaties.

Two types of CIS agreements can be distinguished: The first group was designed to create common coordinating institutions, while the second, characterized as modus vivendi agreements aimed at preventing basic infrastructures of the former Soviet Union, which the other CIS republics could not replace, from totally collapsing. These 'safety-net' agreements established coordinating bodies in key sectors to regulate inter-state coordination in sectors such as transport, energy, and communication.

In the first half-year of the Commonwealth, Ukraine viewed the CIS simply as a ad hoc framework for coordination and dealing with common problems. Both Ukraine and Turkmenistan refused to recognize the CIS as a permanent institution, much less as a super-national, inter-governmental or international organization. Azerbaijan and Moldova also made it clear that

---


4. Ibid.; See also Sheehy, note 2.