

Falling Apart or Coming Together? Processes of Decentralization and Integration in the CIS

SUEZAWA Megumi

Introduction

Ten years have passed since the breakup of the Soviet Union and the founding of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). At the CIS Summit held in December 2001, a document summarizing “CIS Activities Over the Past 10 Years, and Tasks for the Future Perspective” was compiled,¹ and there have been many similar attempts by magazines and newspapers to address this topic.

Since the CIS’s founding in December 1991, the differing interests of member states in regard to regional integration have led to a series of trial-and-error experiments, in the course of which the CIS has transformed itself. But all questions about the level of the internal unity aside, it is a fact that the CIS has played the roles of peacefully dissolving the Soviet Union, handling the aftermath of the breakup, and coordinating relations between states in the region. Consequently, the Soviet Union was able to avoid a breakup accompanied by armed conflict, as happened in Yugoslavia. Of course, armed conflicts have broken out in places including Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, the Trans-Dniester, and Tajikistan; however, it should be noted that these disputes did not spread throughout the Soviet Union, but remained localized.

Despite predictions at times that the Commonwealth would meet the same fate as the former Soviet Union, the CIS has continued to exist without seeing a single one of its member nations withdraw, and its role in addressing members’ common concerns, such as terrorism and crime, has been again recognized as an important element for the regional security and stability.

This report summarizes the CIS’s transformation, with a focus on regional integration and detachment (decentralization).

1. Ten years of the CIS

(1) From institutionalization to integration

After the failed coup d’etat by conservatives in August 1991, independence movements in individual Soviet republics became a regular occurrence. However, in the words of G. Burbulis – the former secretary of state who is viewed as the author of the CIS founding scenario – December 8, 1991, was the most important day, on which the world confirmed the end of the Cold War and the breakup of the last unique empire of the twentieth century.²

¹ *Итоги деятельности СНГ за 10 лет и задачи на перспективу*, <http://www.uzland.uz/2001/December/01/06.htm>.

² *Sankei Shinbun*, November 29, 2001.

The Agreement on the Establishment of the CIS of December 8, 1991, the Protocol of that agreement and the Alma-Ata Declaration on the 21st of that month stipulate the aim of this new organization as follows: to solve the problems that accompanied the Soviet Union's breakup, such as the disposition of nuclear arms, external assets, and the military and the implementation of international treaties; to address problems more on the level of everyday life, such as administering pensions and handling transfers of people and goods in the former Soviet Union region; and to build relations among the new republics, which were now foreign countries. At the same time, the creation of the CIS's own organization and principles was also under way. The CIS Charter, signed at the Minsk Summit of January 22, 1993, can be viewed as an attempt to further clarify the principles of the CIS.

Between the Commonwealth's formation in December 1991 and the beginning of 1993, some 21 summits were held, and the CIS established decision-making bodies such as the Council of Heads of State, the Council of Heads of Government and the Council of Ministers, as well as the Economic Court, the Inter-parliamentary Assembly, and the Executive Secretariat. At present, there are nearly 70 field-specific committees, covering fields from science and technology, culture, transportation, energy, and communications to climate and veterinary medicine; and over 1,300 treaties and other agreements forming the legal foundation of the CIS have been signed.

As the CIS was forming its organizational mechanisms, Russia tried to strengthen the integration process in the military, economic, and political field, one model of which had to be the integration of the old Soviet military into a unified CIS military force. Because movements within Ukraine and other republics to form their own national military forces had intensified, the concept for the unified military was changed to an organization for the maintenance of collective security; in May 1992, in Tashkent, the Collective Security Treaty was signed by Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Azerbaijan and Moldova – which until that time had not considered ratifying national documents pertaining to CIS membership, and Georgia, who was not participating in the CIS founding agreements from the very beginning – formally joined in CIS in 1993 and 1994.

(2) Crisis phase: Inadequacy of CIS functions

Subsequently, however, the number of summits decreased. In addition to the condition of Yeltsin's health, the fact that it had become difficult to coordinate the member nations' interests can also be cited as a factor. Quite often it was observed that representatives of member countries cancelled their participation in CIS meetings. The low degree of the implementation of CIS documents adopted also cited as one reason for its "functional inadequacy." Of a total of 115 documents adopted by July 1, 1998 which needed internal ratification procedures by member countries – even Russia ratified only 36% of the documents signed, while Turkmenistan ratified only 18% and Georgia – which was, granted, a late-

comer to the commonwealth – ratified only 7%.³ The CIS documents ended up as mere scraps of paper not only because financial difficulties and internal national disputes made implementation physically difficult, but also because of systemic problems in the CIS organization itself, such as a lack of mechanisms for monitoring the implementation of the treaties and a lack of measures for punishing failure to comply with the obligations.

According to the research conducted by Akihiro Iwashita, among experts of international law in Russia, Belarus' and Ukraine, the EU is often cited as a model for the CIS.⁴ But the EU, which was formed to unify sovereign nations, is fundamentally different from the CIS, which was formed for the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and given that the breakup of the Soviet Union was prompted by the republics' demands for expanding sovereignty, it is only natural that the CIS nations were wary of transferring sovereignty. Differing stances toward Russia (which sought a unification centered on itself) gave rise to factions within the CIS, and this rise of "mini-blocs" became one factor (mentioned later) in what was cited as the CIS's degeneration into a mere shell. Unlike the EU, which was backed by nations with developed economies, the CIS was (and is) an organization composed of economically weak countries, and they are still on the way on the nation-building. The countries depended on Russia to a great degree, and the pace of economic reforms varied from one country to the next.

Since about 1997, voices criticizing conditions in the CIS have been heard at summits from all sides: those countries who preferred more advanced integration were unsatisfied with the slow speed of the integration, and those countries who were against to it, showed a skepticism toward the Russian ambition to "reintegrate" the region. In his 1999 presidential message before parliament, Yeltsin himself said, "At the present time, the CIS lacks the mechanisms, either political or economic, to secure the conditions needed for mutual cooperation." The aforementioned "CIS Activities Over the Past 10 Years, and Tasks for the Future Perspective" too, also states frankly that "A certain gap has been perceived between initial expectations and current reality."

2. The formation of regional blocs in the CIS

Within the CIS, Russia and Belarus' have progressed in stages toward integration. Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan joined the Russia-Belarus' Custom Union, which became "The Eurasian Economic Community" in 2000 with the intention of the further economic integration. Those five countries also concluded the "Treaty for the deepening integration" and, naturally, considered to be a supporter of the strong integration of the CIS.

³ Симонян, Г.В., «К вопросу о механизме обеспечения исполнения межгосударственных (межправительственных) соглашений государствами-участниками СНГ», *Белорусский журнал международного права и международных отношений*, 99, №1.

⁴ Akihiro Iwashita, «CIS no kikouteki tenkai» (Institutional development of CIS), The Japan Institute of International Affairs, *The Current Situation and Future Perspective of CIS*, pp.17-32.

Meanwhile, however, Ukraine and Moldova are also forming their Customs Union, and together with Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan they have drawn a line between themselves and Russia by forming what is known as GUUAM. Besides Ukraine, who has been consistently opposed to the political and military integration in the CIS, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Georgia quitted their membership in the collective security treaty. Even though Kyrgyzstan's president, Akayev commented that "The purpose of the Eurasian Economic Community is to get in sync on regional trade liberalization and relations with international organizations, and it is not in opposition to the CIS or to GUUAM,"⁵ looking at the lineup of member nations, it is obvious that relations with Russia are in the background. There are also various other organizations, such as the Central Asia Economic Community, formed by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

(1) Cohesive forces

Factors cited as promoting unity among the CIS nations are the difficulty of achieving independence because of economic frailty; a lack of defensive strength resulting from funding shortages; territorial disputes with neighboring nations; and the domestic problem of the presence of inhabitants from Russia. Cuts in military expenditures made it cheaper to use the existing infrastructure and military industrial network, and weapons adhering to a common standard. In the economic realm, even Ukraine, which was skeptical about a Russia-centered unification, became an associate member of the Treaty of the Economic Union of September 1993.

Just after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the republics had three options; becoming neutral states, joining a neighboring regional organization or to form their own organization. However, for Ukraine EU and NATO were too far, and because Central European countries began to turn toward the West rather than the East in regional cooperation, Ukraine came to occupy a marginal position among European states. In Moldova's unification with Romania, resistance in the Trans-Dniester was too strong, while in the Central Asia, Afghanistan's presence was an obstacle to cohesion with the South. Turkey showed some interest in the Caucasus and the Central Asia, but at the same time it looked more toward NATO and the EU. "Shanghai Five" (subsequently the Shanghai Organization of Cooperation), which included China, is a cooperative organization that exists more for the purpose of guaranteeing border security and countering terrorism than for regional integration. Ultimately, for all of these countries, there has been no regional mechanism to substitute for the CIS.

Of the countries, as was already mentioned, the one that has forged the closest ties with Russia is Belarus'. Both countries have progressed toward unification in stages, first forming "Community" (сообщество), then "Union of States" (союз государств), and ultimately becoming a "Union State" (союзное государство). Initially, plans called for the Union State Treaty to be signed in mid-1999, and President Lukashenko made repeated appeals to Russia to conclude the agree-

⁵ «Новое понимание Евразийства», *Современная Европа*, 2000, №1, с.10-11.

ment. Russia delayed signing because it was unhappy with Belarus' for lagging in its progress toward a market economy and for failing to pay contribution to the CIS, and because of unresolved issues, such as problems establishing a presidential post and organizing a parliament. Ultimately, the Union States Treaty established no presidential post.

Only Belarus' joined Russia in being absent from the NATO summit held in April 1999, after the NATO airstrikes on Yugoslavia. On June 21, the countries held "Zapad 1999," the largest joint military training exercise in the post-Cold War era, mobilizing about 50,000 personnel. Unlike Ukraine, Belarus' does not flash the NATO card; for Russia, it is the only westerly neighbor that is facing East. This Union State [=union comprising Russia and Belarus] is open, and should other nations want to join in the future, both the name and the content of the treaty will be reviewed.

With the emergence of the Taliban and the movements of Islamic fundamentalists in Central Asia, the collective security organization is shifting its emphasis to counterterrorism. Since the end of the Cold War, the absence of a "common enemy," which served as a divisive force in the Soviet era, has been filled by the Islamic fundamentalist threat. While the Russia-Belarus' alliance is attracting attention as a model for CIS integration, the CIS's *raison d'être* is becoming more heavily weighted toward the south.

(2) Divisive forces

Unlike the European states in the EU, the 12 nations of the CIS do not have a common identity. Compared with the aforementioned nations that favor integration, other countries have been skeptical about a Russia-centered unification. Countries that have natural resources – such as Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan – and countries that have had reasons for friction with Russia – such as Ukraine, Moldova (Trans-Dniester conflict), and Georgia (Abkhazia, southern Ossetia) – have been trying to draw a line between them and Russia.

Azerbaijan was displeased with Russia for its leanings toward Armenia, and at the CIS summit in April 1999, Azerbaijan made a speech criticizing Russia for increasing its forces of anti-air missiles and Mig-29 fighter aircraft used by the Russian military stationed in Armenia. Georgia appealed to Russia to resolve Georgia's domestic conflict, and joined the CIS as an incentive, but because no resolution to the dispute was reached, in December 1996 the Georgian parliament established a committee to investigate whether or not that country should limit itself to membership in the CIS. Both Azerbaijan and Georgia are drawing closer to NATO and the United States: Azerbaijan has not refused to provide bases to NATO,⁶ and Georgia has established a special headquarters for cooperation with NATO and is sending out feelers about joining NATO.

The CIS Charter, which includes provisions for collective security, was not signed by Ukraine and Turkmenistan; since Ukraine did not sign, the document lacked the participation of what can be termed one of the CIS's founding nations.

⁶ *Зеркало недели*, 13 февраля 1999 года, №6, с.5.

In 1999, events symbolic of Russia's declining cohesive power took place one after another. At the CIS summit on April 2, Russia pressed for the adoption of a joint declaration criticizing the NATO airstrikes on Yugoslavia, but this did not come to pass; and though a joint declaration criticizing the airstrikes had been adopted at the meeting of national defense ministers held before the summit, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Moldova did not participate in that declaration. Also at the CIS summit, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Uzbekistan withdrew from the Tashkent Treaty; and at the NATO summit on April 24, the leaders of all CIS nations except Russia and Belarus' participated; and furthermore, on the following day – the 25th – Uzbekistan announced its membership in the GUUAM alliance. GUUAM's main mission is the common defense of energy pipelines such as the Eurasia and Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia (TRACECA), but integration with Euro-Atlantic organizations is also one of its areas of cooperation. However, one cannot deny the reality that GUUAM is a group of economically less developed countries, and it is even harder to predict what these countries will be able to accomplish than it is to predict what the CIS will be able to accomplish.

3. New Phase: Reform and Transformation of the CIS

(1) Toward reform

However, though internal criticism has been building within the CIS, the CIS has been debating organizational reforms continuously since 1998. At the meeting of the Council of Head of State held in Moscow on April 2, 1999, participants embarked on a project to reorganize the CIS by adopting a resolution to integrate the Executive Secretariat, the Interstate Economic Committee of the Economic Union, and the department-specific interstate and intergovernmental clerical operations working committees into a single permanent administrative and coordinating body, the CIS Executive Committee. The main pillars of the reforms are organizational integration and shrinkage, and giving priority to the economic activity. One aggressive promoter of this institutional reform was Berezovsky, the Executive Secretary. His proposal for CIS reform also concurred with the interests of Ukraine, which are economically oriented. However, on March 4, 1993, Yeltsin dismissed Berezovsky for "actions beyond the scope of his authority and failure to execute the orders of the CIS Council of Head of State." The Russian government is said to have been displeased by Berezovsky's efforts to expand the authority of the Executive Secretariat, i.e., purely domestic political reason.

But this move is consistent with the direction of CIS reforms, and the countries do not deny the idea of "the CIS as an economic alliance." Russia's policy toward the CIS is also showing a stronger tendency toward the pursuit of economic rationalization. Even the concept of a Free Trade Zone – for which an agreement was signed in 1994 but which was never actually established – is finally showing signs of becoming a reality, now that Russia has shifted to adopt destination principle for value-added tax.

Under these circumstances, Russia seems to be developing a more cautious and diverse policy toward the CIS. According to Yeltsin, "There is no need for

unification with Belarus' to become a model for relations with other countries." And Putin says, "GUUAM and the Eurasian Economic Community do not weaken the CIS, but rather supplement it."⁷

(2) Impact of the "9.11"

Prompted by the frequent occurrence of terrorist incidents, participants in the CIS Summit meeting on January 25, 2000, decided to establish a Anti-terrorism Center for controlling illegal immigration, exchanging information about terrorism, and extraditing criminals. Uzbekistan, one of the GUUAM members, joined this Center.

In addition to these trends, the terrorist incidents that occurred in the United States on September 11, 2001, also exerted a great impact on the CIS. First, Ukraine, which had in the past refused to cooperate in any area outside the economic realm, not only decided to participate in the Anti-terrorism Center, but even suggested the possibility of joining the Collective Security Treaty. This is because terrorist incursions and the influx of Afghan refugees have now become actual problems for Ukraine too. Along with Uzbekistan's becoming closer to Russia in terms of terrorist policy, trends in these two major CIS countries will surely bring about changes in CIS unification. Putin's decision in supporting U.S. military operation in Afghanistan also changed the picture of Central Asia by letting U.S. troops come into this area, which was impossible to imagine 10 years ago.

In conclusion

As previously stated herein, in the 10 years since its founding the CIS has continued to exist amid trial and error. While the CIS is often the target of comments such as "The CIS has fallen into functional paralysis" and "It will meet the same fate as the Soviet Union," if one stipulates that the sole purpose of the Commonwealth was to handle the aftermath of the Soviet Union's breakup, this historic mission would already have been concluded. However, even now, voices in favor of abolishing the CIS are not being heard from any of the countries. The 10 year anniversary summit meeting held on November 30, 2001, was attended even by Niyazov, who had often been absent until now, and Shevardnadze, who had been hinting at retirement; the latter even stated that "Neither the significance, nor the urgency, nor the hope of cooperation within the CIS framework has been lost."⁸ While making reforms to the CIS, the member nations can be said to desire the organization's continued existence. Also, in view of the various changes in the stance of the CIS itself, and of CIS member nations, that have been described so far, it is impossible to chart out a simple bidirectional course of "unification" vs. "separation."

⁷ Научно-исследовательский институт социальных систем МГУ, СНГ: 10 лет некоторые итоги, Серия: Научные доклады №5, Июль 2001 года, с.15.

⁸ Независимая газета, 30 ноября 2001 года.

If Russia shifts to a pragmatic policy, and reforms leading to a functional CIS progress, the CIS will at last stand at the starting point to make the shift from an “organization for handling the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s dissolution” to a normal multinational organization of sovereign states.