The Commonwealth of Independent States: an example of failed regionalism?

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Abstract. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was designed to manage the collapse of the Soviet Union and foster post-Soviet cooperation in political, economic, and security spheres. Over a decade into its existence, most analysts would rate it a failure: many post-Soviet states do not participate in CIS ventures, the institutional machinery of the CIS is weak, and Russia, the most dominant post-Soviet state, has tended to favour bi-lateral relationships over multi-lateral institutions. Why is this the case? This article looks at the CIS through the prism of theories of regionalism, demonstrating that the CIS was handicapped on many fronts, including emergent multi-polarity in the post-Soviet space and domestic-level political considerations in many post-Soviet states.

Introduction

In 1991, as the Soviet Union collapsed, the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus came together to create the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), an organisation designed to manage the Soviet breakup and preserve many of the pre-existing economic, political, and military ties among the Soviet republics. Other post-Soviet states rushed to join the CIS, and in the first year of its existence the members of the CIS created a host of institutions for the organisation and signed over 250 documents and accords to give it a clearer mission and focus. Beyond ensuring a civilised post-Soviet divorce, the CIS had a broad agenda to develop new forms of regional cooperation. According to the January 1993 Charter of the CIS, the CIS recognised the sovereignty of each of its members and would be directed to ‘further development and strengthening of the relations of friendship, good neighbourliness, inter-ethnic accord, trust, mutual understanding and mutually advantageous cooperation among the member states’. Its remit included cooperation in economics, security, the environment, human rights, social and cultural development, and work towards the ‘spiritual unity’ of the peoples of the member states.

By the end of the 1990s, however, it was clear that the CIS had failed to live up to its promises. Observers agreed that it had ‘failed to integrate the Soviet successor states in any meaningful sense’, it had ‘amounted to little’ and was a ‘failure by

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almost any measure’, it was ‘on its last legs’ and its end was ‘imminent’, and it was essentially a ‘fiction’, with ‘multiple, helpless structures’ that created only an ‘illusion of commonality in the post-Soviet space’.

Russian leaders themselves freely admitted that integration in the CIS ‘left much to be desired’ and compared it to a drowning man or a sick patient. Reports of its demise in the 1990s did prove to be premature, as it has hobbled on throughout the 2000s, but its importance is often marginal, superseded both by bilateral ties between states and by other regional organisations.

The failure of the CIS stands in stark contrast to progress in regional cooperation and integration in Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Africa. This article seeks to uncover some of the underlying reasons for the shortcomings and disappointments of the CIS. It is divided into three parts. First, it will briefly review some of the theories and perspectives in the international relations literature that attempt to explain the development of regionalism. Second, it will offer a sketch of some of the highlights and more of the lowlights of CIS activity, focusing in particular on the first decade of the organisation’s life. Finally, it will return back to the theoretical perspectives, suggesting how some of them, particularly those that focus on the structure of the international system and constructivist approaches, help account for the failures of the CIS.

**Perspectives on regionalism**

What helps promote international cooperation, particularly at a regional level? There is, of course, a broad literature on this topic, some of which is reviewed in more detail elsewhere in this volume. Explanations tend to fall into four different categories: the importance of the structure of the international system; instrumental approaches often rooted in interdependence; state-level factors; and cultural-constructivist perspectives that emphasise development not so much of formal institutions but of a sense of region and regional identity.

**Geopolitical factors**

Neorealistm emphasises international structure – commonly defined by the number of great powers in the global or, in this case, regional system – as crucial to explain

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both conflict and cooperation. Neo-realists tend to view regionalism as akin to alliance formation. One basic idea is that of balance of power – that states will form alliances and cooperative arrangements if they perceive some sort of threat. This threat can be from outside the region, so states may create regional arrangements to augment their own power. Examples would include the Gulf Cooperation Council (against Iran), ASEAN (against Vietnam), and MERCOSUR (against the US). The threat, however, may also come from within the region itself, meaning that states might try to use multi-lateral institutions or regional integration to lock a regionally powerful state into a structure that can contain it. Arguably, the European Union (EU) has done so with respect to Germany,8 and this notion could be of great utility in the CIS, over which Russia casts a long shadow.

In contrast to the idea of balancing or being entrapped within regional institutions, some would emphasise the role of global or regional powers or hegemons in fostering cooperation. In addition to possessing resources that might overcome collective action problems, regional hegemons may see the growth of regional institutions, which they would dominate, as a means for furthering their own agenda, either within the region itself or with respect to the broader world. Other states would then bandwagon with the hegemon in the hope of receiving some benefits from the more powerful state or from regional structures themselves. The US, for example, has helped foster many regional organisations, including NAFTA, the EU, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and ASEAN, all of which serve(d) an both American and local interests.9 The key, however, is that the willingness of other states to go along with the hegemon will be conditioned upon this commonality of interest. With respect to the CIS, the obvious hegemonic power is Russia. Thus, to the extent that Russia sees regionalism to its own advantage and other states see some benefit to attracting themselves to Russia, one might imagine that Russian-led regionalism would develop.10

Institutionalism and the importance of interdependence

Structural theories, rooted in considerations of power, tend to de-emphasise other motivations that might lead states to cooperate on a regional level. Regionalism, however, may not automatically happen because of power politics; political actors may pursue regionalism out of instrumentalist, problem-solving motivations. Institutionalist theories maintain that international cooperation, including regionalism, arises out of common problems shared by states and various forms of interdependence.11 Granted, global or multi-regional international institutions (for example the UN, the World Bank, the WTO, and the OECD) may be involved in

9 For the idea that regionalism could be an instrument for hegemonic control, see James Mittelman and Richard Falk, ‘Hegemony: the relevance of regionalism?’, in Bjorn Hettne et al. (eds), National Perspectives on New Regionalism in the North (London: Macmillan, 1999). See also Anthony Payne and Andrew Gamble (eds), Regionalism and World Order (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1996).
10 For assessment of Russia’s role as a hegemon with respect to Central Asia, see Roy Allison, ‘Regionalism, regional structures ad security management in Central Asia’, International Affairs, 80:3 (2004), pp. 467–9.
11 The literature on institutionalism and neo-liberal institutionalism is enormous. See Joseph Nye, International Regionalism (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1968); Robert Keohane, International
many issues, but frequently it may be that the proper or more practical level for collective action is at the region. Regionalisation makes sense because the effects of global, transnational issues ‘are likely to be felt most directly within particular regions and it is on a regional, rather than a global level that the balance of interests and incentives is likely to press states to seek some policy response’ 12. Beyond ‘outside-in’ approaches that look at the global system, one should also bear in mind regional interdependencies that create a demand for regional organisations and regimes to manage common problems by pooling resources, reducing transaction costs, providing information, and creating expectations for further cooperation.

Such perspectives could clearly apply to the CIS, whose member-states, of course, were linked toward in numerous ways because they were all part of a single state, the Soviet Union. Interdependencies (in trade, investment, transportation networks, movement of people, even cultural ties) were thus quite profound even before the CIS was established. Assuming that interdependencies remained in place, this theory would lead one, however, to believe that the CIS would fare well, which, as noted, has not been the case.

State-level explanations

Looking within states themselves and their political decision-makers, what sort of factors might foster regionalism? One possibility would be regime type: democracies, which tend not to fight each other, might be more amenable to multi-lateral regional institutions. Conversely, authoritarian leaders may be less willing to commit themselves to regional organisations that might impinge upon their own political prerogatives. To the extent that many of the states in the CIS (Central Asian countries, Belarus, and, increasingly, Russia itself) fail to meet democratic criteria, one might think that regional cooperation would suffer, but, of course, a collection of authoritarian states might find that they have enough in common (for example to fend off Western powers interested in spreading democracy) that regionalism could take hold.

Another consideration would be state coherence and capacity. Weak states may make region-building more difficult, insofar as they have fewer resources to bring to the regional project. Weak states, particularly those that are relatively new and do not have much social coherence, may also put more priority on their nation and state-building agendas than on regionalism, which could openly conflict with the need to establish a state-centred identity and sovereign domestic political structures. To the extent that many of the CIS states are both new and have experienced internal domestic difficulties that weaken their capacity, this explanation may have merit in explaining the weakness of the CIS.

Lastly, drawing from Steven David’s idea of ‘omnibalancing’, one might want to take into consideration how internal threats to the survival of political elites – as opposed to the survival of the state itself – make structure external alignment choices. Looking at weaker Third World states where leaders often have low levels of

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domestic legitimacy, David hypothesises that political elites may bandwagon with locally strong states in order to fend off local threats and thereby bolster their chances of survival, even to the detriment of the security of the state itself. To the extent that one finds such domestic political arrangements in CIS states, it may explain the choices made by state elites with respect to their willingness to submit to Russian hegemony and participate in the CIS.

Cultural-constructivist approaches

Regionalism may rest on more than simple political or economic calculations. Successful examples of regionalism may also have a cultural component, a sense of regional awareness or identity that gives broader coherence and support to whatever institutional form regionalism may take. In this context, non-state actors may play an important role to augment efforts by states to develop multi-faceted connections within a region. In this vein, regions are not a priori givens but are socially constituted and constructed, and regionalism is a process that can be made and un-made with shifting socio-cultural boundaries. Andrew Hurrell notes that the constructivist perspective rests on the idea that ‘regional cohesion depends on a sustained and durable sense of community based on mutual responsiveness, trust, and high levels of what might be called “cognitive interdependence”’.

One can see how such logic might be applied. The EU, for example, is arguably being transformed from a ‘problem-solving’ economic bloc into an organisation defined by common values, norms, and identity. Regionalism has been harder to achieve in Asia, perhaps due to greater cultural and ideological diversity. As for the CIS, its members, of course, were joined together in the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire, giving its members some shared experiences and the post-Soviet space some regional coherence. In that sense, the CIS had a head start in forging some sort of regional identity. The issue, however, would be whether its members were comfortable with that idea based upon the Russian/Soviet experience – which implied domination by Moscow – or whether they would seek to create new ideas that might undermine the capacity of the CIS to preserve and build upon previous integration.

What happened to the CIS?

As noted earlier, the CIS was designed to both manage the collapse of the Soviet Union and to provide a means to preserve and potentially strengthen ties among the post-Soviet states. The CIS has an elaborate institutional structure and its members

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14 This perspective is common in the ‘new regionalism’ literature. See Fredrik Söderbaum and Timothy Shaw, Theories of New Regionalism (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
have signed agreements on a number of issues. However, one might question what tangible outcomes the CIS has really produced. By the end of the 1990s, many CIS states had grown weary of the CIS and suspicious of Russia. Possessing weak loyalty to the CIS and convinced they had little voice within it, many began looking for exit options. Announcements of its death, however, proved to be premature. The CIS has managed to survive, but, as an institution, it is far from being a central actor in the post-Soviet space.

A rocky start for the CIS

The problems within the CIS did not emerge suddenly. Indeed, the CIS had difficulties since its very inception, which 'should have made clear that the CIS was doomed as any sort of formal political organisation'.17 Many of its ideals, such as respecting state sovereignty, renouncing the use of force or coercion, and coordinating economic policies, have been breached more than practiced. From its beginning several states showed little or no enthusiasm for the CIS: Ukraine, a founding member, signed onto initial CIS statues but added reservations on issues such as a single currency, free movement of peoples, collective defence, and foreign policy; Georgia joined the CIS only at the end of 1993 as a result of Russian coercion; the Moldovan parliament refused to ratify CIS membership until 1994, and then only after imposition of punitive agricultural tariffs by Russia; and Azerbaijan pulled out of the CIS in 1992, only to re-join the following year after a coup installed a government more to Moscow's liking.

Cooperation within the CIS occurs by consensus of interested parties, meaning one can associate with CIS agreements or choose to not do so, however one sees fit. Many states have divergent conceptions about the proper role of the CIS. Consequently, many states have not ratified CIS agreements or chose not to participate in CIS structures. In the security arena, early ideas to create integrated CIS defence forces and a single high command were shelved, and the 1992 CIS Treaty on Collective Security was initially signed by only six members. Much of the problem was that the major security threat to CIS states came from either within their own states (for example civil conflict in Tajikistan) or from within the CIS itself, which, in most cases, meant from Russia. For example, Russian military forces stationed in Moldova supported the Transnistrian separatist movement, Russia aided Abkhazian and Ossetian separatists in Georgia, Russia pressured Ukraine to turn over the Black Sea Fleet to Russian control, and Russian parliamentarians advanced Russian claims over Crimea. Russian-led CIS 'peacekeeping efforts' were therefore viewed suspiciously by many as a means for Russia to re-insert itself in the post-Soviet space.18

More generally, Russian claims that the CIS was its sphere of influence - the so-called Monroeski Doctrine19 - or that Russia had the right to intervene in CIS states to protect the rights of ethnic Russians made many uneasy about creating a

17 Olcott et al. (1999), p. 9. Much of this section is draws from this source as well as Kubicek 1999, and Sakwa and Webber, 1999.
18 Dov Lynch, Russia's Peacekeeping Strategies in the CIS (New York: St. Martin's 2000).
19 The first reference I can to this term is by Andranik Migranian, currently a Putin adviser, in Rossiiskaia gazeta, 4 August 1992.
security structure that would, because of power asymmetries, be dominated by Russia.

The CIS fared little better on economic questions. Intra-CIS trade targets were not met, CIS funds for joint investments were minimal, and cooperation failed to materialise on basic questions such as eliminating value-added-taxes on exports. Coordination on economic reforms was virtually non-existent, and in many cases states imposed quotas, raised tariffs, or even stopped shipping goods or energy supplies to each other because of payment problems. States squabbled over access to resources (for example water in Central Asia, offshore drilling rights in the Caspian Sea). By 1993, Russia felt it no longer could support the ruble zone, and subsequent calls for a free-trade zone or an economic union, best evidenced by the 1996 Treaty on the Intensification of Integration, garnered support in only a handful of states.20 Notably, however, even after Russia agreed in 1995 to form a customs union with Belarus and Kazakhstan, it unilaterally raised import tariffs, undercutting its credibility with respect to the goal of greater economic cooperation. Writing in 1999, one group of analysts bluntly concluded, ‘The effect of the CIS on economic integration is largely negative’.21 By the 2000s, efforts to join the World Trade Organization took top priority in many states, including Russia, and maintaining or developing a special trade regime within the CIS made less and less sense.

Political cooperation was also weak. True, the CIS did succeed in working out many of the legal questions emanating from the disintegration of the Soviet Union, but finding common ground on managing post-1991 problems and governing intra-state behaviour has been difficult. The 1993 CIS Charter was envisioned as something like the Treaty of Rome and initially proposed creating supranational structures. These were, however, rejected by several states, and other provisions of the Charter were ‘so watered down that [in the end] it did not oblige members to do anything’.22 In 1994, Kazakhstan’s President, Nursultan Nazarabev, proposed creation of a more federal ‘Eurasian Union’, which was ultimately rejected by most CIS members, including Russia. The CIS does have over 60 institutions and specialised bodies23 (for example Inter-Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Heads of State, Executive Secretariat, various Inter-State councils, an Economic Court) through which cooperation could be pursued, but these have not worked well. Many states – including Ukraine, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Uzbekistan – have refused to participate in many of the CIS structures. One study found that of the 886 documents adopted by the CIS Inter-Parliamentary Assembly and Council of Heads of State from 1991 to March 1998, only 130 had been signed by all of its members.24 Ideas such as the standardisation of members’ legislation or creation of a single legal space akin to what prevails within the EU have gone nowhere, and Russian efforts to promote dual citizenship encountered resistance in most states. Even if all members are on-board, these forums have generally been under-utilised, as ‘what passes for multilateral activity within the CIS has tended to be declaratory

20 This was signed by Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. Tajikistan joined in 1999.
23 For a list of CIS institutions and specialised bodies created through the 1990s, see Olcott et al., 1999, pp. 12–13.
24 Izvestiia, 18 March 1998.
and immaterial to the manner of governance within its member states’. In 1997, Russian President Boris Yeltsin flatly declared, ‘everybody is dissatisfied with the state of affairs in the CIS’. Nonetheless, at the 1997 CIS Summit in Chisinau, Moldova, none of Yeltsin’s proposed reforms were accepted by other CIS states, and Russia found itself attacked on several fronts. The following year Boris Berezovsky, then the executive secretary of the CIS, concluded that ‘instead of seven years of integration, we have in effect had seven years of disintegration’.

Overall, what one saw was that ‘passive resistance by most member states and enthusiasm without resources by others’ prevented the CIS from establishing itself an effective regional organisation. Various factors can be invoked to explain these difficulties. Each state had its own priorities, and few leaders were willing to surrender newly-won sovereignty to an international institution. Concerns about Russian intentions, however, were at best thinly concealed, as on many CIS-wide questions a pro-CIS core which was centred on Russia and included Belarus, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan usually found itself pitted against the CIS-sceptics, centred on Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan, all of which were more suspicious of Russian intentions. These skeptics, however, did not pull out of the CIS, opting instead to prolong ‘the days of the outer shell under the name ‘Commonwealth’ until they are adapted to the new world economic map, until they are not pre-occupied with the problems that require careful relations with Russia’.

**The emergence of geopolitical pluralism**

By the late 1990s, there were clear signs of change in the post-Soviet space. If, in the early 1990s, Russia could act as a hegemonic power over other CIS states, by the late 1990s the international environment was more pluralist, with many actors (for example the US, China, Turkey, India, Iran, the EU) both interested and capable of playing a significant role in the various parts of the CIS. In addition, many post-Soviet states were more secure in their own independence and looking to branch out in terms of their international involvement. ‘Geo-political pluralism’ therefore opened up new opportunities for many CIS states while undermining what already was a rickety CIS structure.

Geopolitical pluralism manifested itself in many ways. For example, trade patterns changed. Whereas in 1992 intra-CIS trade constituted 57 per cent of total trade for CIS countries, by 1997 that figure had plummeted to 33 per cent, including only 22 per cent of trade for Russia, the leading actor within the CIS. Instead of looking to each other or to Russia, post-Soviet states pursued trade and investment from Europe, the Middle East, the US, Japan, and China, among others. This development was a result of both push and pull factors. CIS members were pushed away

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26 Both quoted in Olcott et al. (1999), p. 69.
27 Ibid., p. 25.
30 From Olcott et al. (1999), p. 62.
from each other because each experienced severe economic problems in the 1990s and many simply had too few resources to create a robust regional economic bloc. They were pulled, however, by the simple fact that other states could offer a better deal, not only economically but with fewer political strings attached. For example, Ukraine, which in 1994 began to adopt market-oriented economic reforms and a more pro-Western policy, began to receive large amounts of European and American financial assistance, resources that bolstered Ukrainian sovereignty at a time when Ukraine was engaged in various political and economic disputes with Russia.

Some of the most dramatic and important developments occurred in the energy sector. As early as 1994, Western investors concluded the ‘Deal of the Century’ to develop oil and gas reserves in Azerbaijan. Western governments and companies also increased investment in Kazakhstan, which was dependent upon Russian pipelines to export its oil to international markets. Four American companies – ChevronTexaco, ExxonMobil, Phillips, and Unocal – held the largest national share (36 per cent of the total) in various production-sharing agreements signed with Caspian oil producers in the 1990s. Europeans and, in particular, the Americans, were not interested in just profits or access to a crucial resource. There was also a clear geo-political component, made clearest in Western backing for pipelines such as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) that would by-pass Russia, thereby denying the ability of Russia to use economic coercion (for example restricting oil or gas flows) against other CIS states while anchoring these states more clearly to the West. One observer noted that the United States ‘rejected Russia’s claims for an energy monopoly . . . [by] seeking to supplant the primacy of Russian affiliations with local governments’ defence establishments and energy producers . . . [and by trying] to compel Russia to accept a very inferior position compared to Russia’s regional ambitions’. China also had ambitions with respect to Central Asian energy, signing agreements on investment in oil and gas fields as well as on pipeline construction with countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

On security questions, there was also movement away from Moscow. NATO, which was expanding into Eastern Europe, offered post-Soviet states membership in its Partnership for Peace programme which was designed to foster greater military cooperation. In some states, such as Georgia and Ukraine, some political leaders began to campaign for NATO membership. In Central Asia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO, formed in 1996 and until 2001 known as the Shanghai Five) which included China as well as Russia and four Central Asian republics, competed with the CIS as the region’s most important multi-lateral security organisation, developing programs to combat terrorism, drug trafficking, and separatism. After 9/11, of course, the US began to play an even more pronounced role on security questions in Central Asia, obtaining rights to use military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Lastly, it bears mentioning that some aspects of geopolitical pluralism arose from within the CIS itself. CIS-skeptics formed the so-called GUAM group (Georgia-Ukraine-Azerbaijan-Moldova, GUUAM from 1999–005 when Uzbekistan was a member). GUAM formed in response to a variety of concerns, including


deployments of Russian military forces and Russian control over energy resources and pipelines. GUAM members advocated closer ties with the West, including NATO, development of a Europe-Asia transit corridor that presumably would not include Russia, and creation of joint peacekeeping forces. Leaders from GU(U)AM denied that they were hostile to Russia or seeking to counterbalance Russia, but this is not particularly convincing as ‘the foreign policies of all the GUUAM are opposed to key elements of Russia’s foreign policy’. In 1992, Azerbaijan and Central Asian states joined the Economic Cooperation Organization, which includes Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. This grouping, however, has had only a marginal impact. As a sub-grouping of only CIS members, three Central Asian states (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan) formed the Central Asian Union in 1994, (renamed the Central Asian Cooperation Organization in 2001) and now including Tajikistan. This organisation was envisioned to become a customs union and create international bodies to promote greater economic cooperation with the ultimate goal of a common market. These schemes, however, have not worked out very well, thanks in part to lack of complementary economic resources and rivalries between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan for regional dominance. Russia has also taken the lead in forming sub-CIS blocs, most notably the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC), which was formed in 2000 and grew out of earlier agreements for a customs union among some CIS members. As of 2008, the EAEC has six members (Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and, since 2006, Uzbekistan) and one of its goals is give viability to and to in effect subsume the Central Asian Cooperation Organization. Finally, in addition to the alphabet soup of regional organisations involving CIS states, one would be remiss not to note that bilateral relations (for example security agreements, investments, social and cultural ties) continue to be important, if not paramount, as regional groupings, including GUAM and the EAEC, have not fully delivered on their promises. Indeed, with respect to arguably the most important intra-CIS relationship, that between Moscow and Kyiv, the CIS has been a ‘largely irrelevant mechanism’.

Russia’s revival under Putin and the CIS

When Vladimir Putin became President of Russia in 2000, he fully recognised Russia’s diminishing role, both on the global stage and in the post-Soviet space. He pledged that relations with CIS states would be the high priority and took a number of steps to bolster Russia’s role in the region. In the energy sphere, Putin pushed for more Russian investment in Caspian littoral states. He reached agreements with both Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan in 2001-2002 to resolve the legal status of drilling rights in the Caspian. Putin also proposed increasing oil and gas shipments from the region through Russian pipelines in an effort to prevent construction of alternative pipelines. This bore fruit, particularly with respect to Kazakhstan, which helped

33 Olcott et al., p. 168. For more on the formation of GU(U)AM see Taras Kuzio, ‘Geopolitical pluralism in the CIS: the emergence of GUUAM’, European Security, 9:2 (Summer 2000), pp. 81–110.
34 Kubicek (1997) and Bohr (2004).
undercut Western efforts to get Kazakh oil to hook up to the BTC and flow westward. The planned export of Kazakh oil through Russian pipelines may, in the words of one report, give Russia an ‘unbreakable stranglehold over Central Asia’s energy reserves’ and spell the end of US and European-backed plans to build a trans-Caspian oil pipeline.36 In addition, Russian concluded long-term contracts for the purchase of Turkmen gas, agreed in 2007 to upgrade gas pipelines flowing from Turkmenistan northward through Kazakhstan and Russia, and stepped up investments in energy fields in Uzbekistan.

In the security area, Russia has recovered from some of the setbacks it suffered after the US stepped up its involvement after 9/11. It has maintained many of its bases in Central Asia whereas the Americans were kicked out of Uzbekistan in 2006 and have an uncertain future with basing rights in Kyrgyzstan. In 2002, six states – Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan – formed the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), an outgrowth of the 1992 CIS Collective Security Treaty. Uzbekistan joined in 2006. The CSTO has conducted joint military exercises and cooperates with the SCO, which has been increasingly visible in Central Asia and is viewed by both Russian and Chinese elites as a vehicle to balance American intrusions into both major powers’ backyard. In 2003, for example, SCO members agreed to conduct military exercises and to set up a Secretariat for the organisation in Beijing and an anti-terrorism centre in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

On economic questions, the EAEC has become the pre-eminent regional organisation on the post-Soviet space. That may not be saying much, as many of its goals are more declaratory than actually implemented. What is interesting, however, is that much of its stated agenda is similar to original goals of the CIS, including creation of a customs union, general rules on trade in goods and services, a unified energy market, standardised currency regulation, joint programs of social and economic development, harmonisation of national legislation, and rights of individuals to obtain services for example educational, medical) in any state. Like the CIS, it has its own Secretariat, Inter-State Parliamentary Assembly, and State Councils. The Chinese, driven both by export markets and the need to diversify their energy supply, are also eager to give more of an economic component to the SCO.

If one counts all of the above as evidence of successful regionalism, it is notable that none of this includes the CIS in its entirety. Regional integration has gone furthest between Russia and Belarus – which have flirted with the idea of unifying – and between Russia and Central Asian states. The latter is hardly surprising, rooted both in economic and security interdependence and common concerns about the West’s democratisation agenda, which included support for the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine (in which the official CIS election monitoring team affirmed the victory of the pro-Russia candidate), and the more inconclusive 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan. China, which is a major player it both security and economic questions in Central Asia, is, in contrast, relatively welcomed as it does not care about democratic shortcomings and can act as a balancer against Russia. Some, however, would maintain that would should not make too much of Russian-led ‘regionalism’ in Central Asia, which is little more than a ‘thin layer of multilateralism still cloak[ed by] bilateral agreements’.37

On this point, the case of Turkmenistan is particularly interesting. Turkmenistan, a repressive totalitarian state under President Saparmurat Niyazov (better known as ‘Turkmenbashi’), was a member of the CIS (but not the EAEC, CSTO, or SCO) although it was officially neutral. After squabbles with Russia in the early 2000s over the status of ethnic Russians in Turkmenistan, it concluded major energy deals with Russia after it experienced a change in leadership in late 2006 after Niyazov’s death. Because Turkmenistan is internationally isolated, its new leadership depends heavily on Russian economic and political support. Interestingly, however, Turkmenistan withdrew from the CIS in 2005 and has not been under any pressure to rejoin (unlike, say, Georgia and Azerbaijan in the early 1990s), reflecting, even from Russia’s perspective, the lack of importance of the CIS in the post-Soviet space.

Meanwhile, those countries that are not active members in the EAEC, CSTO, or SCO have strengthened some of their pre-existing ties while turning more and more to the West. GUAM still exists, although non-democratic Azerbaijan does not fit so well in this grouping now that the other three states can make stronger claims to be democratic. On this score, in 2005 Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, together with the three Baltic states, Slovenia, Romania, and Macedonia, formed the Community of Democratic Choice (CDC). Unlike other organisations on the post-Soviet space, the CDC puts a priority on democracy and human rights and reaches out to western countries. One Georgian official said he saw the CDC as something in between the two main ‘poles of attraction’ in the region (the EU and SCO) and that the CDC ‘may appeal to those countries that are caught between those two blocs, but lean toward democracy and the West’. At the same time, Moldova and Ukraine have made no secret of wanting to join the EU. In the aftermath of the Orange Revolution, Ukraine’s ‘multi-vector’ foreign policy under Kuchma has given way to a much stronger focus on the West and Kyiv now shows little enthusiasm for fulfilling its 2003 pledge to create a common economic space with Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. All the GUAM states seek closer ties, if not membership, with NATO, and propose creating a Russia-free mirror-image of SCO (with the US playing something akin to the role of China in SCO), including a regional centre to coordinate anti-terrorism efforts. Meanwhile, their relations with Russia have soured, with Russia backing the opponents of the Ukrainian ‘Orange Revolution’, blocking the importation of goods from Georgia, continuing its support of separatists in Moldova and Georgia, and raising prices on gas deliveries.

The CIS still hobbles on, largely because it provides a forum to discuss problems and manages some issues of ‘low politics’ (for example railroad transport, police cooperation) while being so weak on major political or economic issues that it demands virtually nothing from its members. Its immediate future, however, is in doubt. In March 2007, Igor Ivanov, the secretary of the Russian Security Council, expressed his doubts about the future of CIS, emphasising that the EAEC had better prospects. Many in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, meanwhile, debate whether their countries should remain CIS members at all. To the extent that there is interest in the post-Soviet space in multilateral organisations or regionalism more broadly

speaking, energy is directed elsewhere, with Russia, Belarus, and Central Asian states moving (at times with China) in one direction and pro-Western countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova (often with US or EU support) in another.

**Explaining the failure of the CIS**

The CIS, while facilitating the breakup of the Soviet Union, has failed to deliver on many of its promises, and now in many respects it has been superseded in the post-Soviet space by other, less-inclusive, regional groupings. How might one account for its failings? The theories of regionalism reviewed earlier in this piece suggest answers to this question, as well as hints about how regionalism might evolve in the post-Soviet space.

**Power politics**

As noted earlier, realist and neo-realist theories would treat regional blocs like military alliances and argue that they form in response to outside threats. The problem with respect to the CIS, however, was its members did not have a common outside threat. Post-Soviet states and publics, obviously, had a variety of concerns, but a physical takeover or economic coercion by an outside power (for example the US, Europe, China) was not one of them. Instead, the top security concerns were either domestic (for example in Tajikistan, Moldova, and Georgia), came from another, non-Russian CIS state (for example Azerbaijan versus Armenia or concerns about Uzbekistan in several Central Asian states), or emanated from Russia itself, either because of fears of possible direct Russian action (for example Russian claims over Ukrainian territory) or because of Russia taking sides in separatist or intra-CIS disputes. There was no need and little prospect for an outward-focused CIS strategy, either in the security realm or in economics. Realists can feel vindicated by the fact that where there has been some shared notion of a common internal or regional threat (for example radical Islam or Islamic-based separatist movements in Central Asia), there has been cooperation, but this occurred either through bi-lateral cooperation or through less inclusive organisations such as the SCO.

The paramount consideration, however, has been Russian power and intentions. Russia clearly was (and for the most part remains) the hegemonic power in the post-Soviet space. As noted above, there are differing perspectives on how hegemony contributes to regionalism. In other contexts (for example the EU) regional powers have been entrapped by regional arrangements, meaning that other states have used regional institutions to balance against one state's preponderance of power. However, as Olcott et al. note:

> The situation in the CIS is not a comparable one. There is no state or group of states in the post-Soviet space that can counterbalance Russia in a supranational decision-making body. The Soviet experience constantly reminds the new elites of the CIS that Russia could effectively usurp their independence in a supranational body in which it is the only major power.\(^{41}\)

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\(^{41}\) Olcott et al. (1999), p. 28.
The relevant point is thus not power *per se* but perceptions about Russian intentions. Many CIS states did not want to find themselves subjected to a new institution that would subjugate them to Russia. They did not want the CIS to be a reincarnation of the Soviet Union. By the late 1990s, as geopolitical pluralism became a reality and several CIS states had options beyond cooperation with Moscow, several CIS states formed GU(U)AM as a sub-CIS bloc to balance Russian power. Such a development would be consistent with expectations of realism. On the other hand, some states were more enthusiastic about the CIS and were willing to bandwagon with Russia. These included most of the Central Asian states, which eagerly sought to join the CIS and thus expand its membership beyond its initial Slavic core and today are linked to Russia through a variety of bilateral and multilateral relationships. Explaining why some states have been more willing to submit to Russian hegemony, however, requires us to look at domestic political concerns, which are discussed more below.

There is also scant evidence to support the notion that the hegemon might provide the impetus for regionalism, at least with respect to the CIS. Russian elites have given lip-service to the CIS, it is true, but they proved unwilling to make crucial sacrifices for the sake of the CIS or to consider what the knock-on effects of their actions would be on the CIS. This was particularly true on questions of economic coordination, as in the early 1990s Russia abandoned core elements of economic cooperation (for example maintaining the ruble zone) because such policies would impinge upon Russian sovereignty. As a result, ‘bi-lateral agreements [basing rights, trade agreements, energy deals] and unilateral actions by Russia replaced co-operation’ and ‘showed that the CIS had not been a particularly effective mechanism for managing Russia’s relations with the NIS [Newly Independent States].’42 A dense web of bilateral ties has thus become a ‘substitute’ for the CIS, something from Russia’s perspective that has been more effective and easier to establish.43 Continuing the line of thought from the previous paragraph, Olcott *et al.* observe:

Russia’s understanding of the same Soviet experience, however, equally reminds it of the costs that Russia might incur by ceding its own sovereignty to a supranational body. Fear that the other members of such a body could take more from Russia than they would contribute has made Russia try to prevent the CIS from developing into an organisation in which sovereignty is yielded equally.44

In its bilateral relationships, Russia moved far closer to some states (for example Belarus and Armenia) than to others, (for example Moldova). While fostering of bilateral ties has been a marked feature of Russian policy in the post-Soviet space, it has, in line with expectations about the power of a regional hegemon, taken the lead in some sub-CIS groupings, particularly the formation of the CSTO and its efforts to transform the limited Central Asian Cooperation Organization into the EAEC. At the time, however, Russia has backed away from the CIS as a whole, allowing it to effectively disintegrate in order to facilitate the formation of more effective regional groups with more reliable partners such as Belarus and Kazakhstan.45 On this point one could also note that hegemonic projects or visions can also be social constructions that can change over time. To the extent that Russian policymakers view the

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world in 2000s as more threatening than before and that some of these threats (for example from ‘coloured revolutions’ in Georgia and Ukraine) come from within the CIS, fostering the CIS became less and less attractive. Ultimately, however, Russia’s unwillingness to support CIS-wide regionalism may be less important than its inability to do so. Geopolitical pluralism means that Russia can no longer dominate the region as it once did.

How important is interdependence?

Beyond power politics, one might also want to consider the effects of interdependence in the CIS. On this score, the prospects for regional cooperation were initially quite positive. Emerging out of a single political unit, the CIS states had a host of economic, political, and social ties, and the common belief was that many of these had to be retained, at least initially, for the sake of stability. Sakwa and Webber argue:

A range of factors pointed to the objective necessity [emphasis mine] for cooperation: the very high levels of mutual interdependence and republican specialisation, the limited economic viability of a majority of the former republics, the poor orientation of all but Russia to external markets, and the common challenges posed by the introduction of market-oriented reforms.

The idea that interdependence functions as glue that would make regionalism within the CIS stick suffers, however, from two problems. First, there is not a straightforward and deterministic link between interdependence and interest. Yes, CIS states were linked together, but that fact did not mean that their interests – to the extent we can think of states as rational actors – converged on maintaining or fostering interdependence. ‘Objective necessities’ therefore may not be enough. For many post-Soviet elites, the first priority was on securing independence, particularly in those states where there had been political mobilisation in favour of sovereignty or independence. The Baltic states, where pro-independence attitudes were most widespread, refused to even join the CIS, and Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine, all of which had substantial pro-independence movements, were rather lukewarm at best about investing to create a powerful and effective regional organisation in the post-Soviet space. Conversely, in Belarus and Central Asia, where there was less popular mobilisation for independence and more dependence (for example budget subsidies) upon Moscow, there was, with the exception of Turkmenistan, more enthusiasm about the CIS.

Secondly, levels of interdependence are not fixed. They can change over time. In the early 1990s, states were drawn to the CIS, both for practical reasons (for example minimise negative fallout from the Soviet collapse) and due to Russian pressure. Within a few years, however, both economic difficulties and geopolitical pluralism changed many of the patterns of (inter)dependence. Trade, investment, and aid from outside the CIS made some states less dependent upon Russia economically.

pipelines reduced the ability of Moscow to play the energy card against countries such as Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. Many states gravitated toward the US and NATO for security. As Valerii Serov, former Russian Deputy Prime Minister, noted in 1997, post-Soviet states ‘have become completely different in comparison with their situation in 1992, when they declared the goal of Commonwealth. [Now] they have the freedom of choice, with whom to build relations, with Russia or with other states’. Again, there was no single pattern as some (for example Moldova and Georgia) were far more willing than others (for example Belarus and Armenia) to make a break with ties they inherited from the Soviet Union. Differences can be explained in part by geography (for example Ukraine or Moldova have far more prospects to develop ties with Europe than, say, Kyrgyzstan) but also by concerns about Russia (discussed above) and domestic political considerations (discussed below).

The larger point, however, concerns the starting point of the CIS compared to that of other regional bodies. Interdependence in the CIS was not, primarily, the result of a free, organic process that grew over time and thus created a ‘demand’ for an international regime or organisation. It was a residual effect of the Soviet experience, one viewed negatively in many quarters. Maintaining many of these ties did not ‘make sense’, particularly once the CIS fulfilled its primary task – managing the breakup of the Soviet Union. Given the disparities of interest and power within the CIS and the involvement in the region by outside powers, one has seen that the shared ties of the Soviet period matter less and less, both objectively (in terms of interdependence) and subjectively (in terms of identity, which is discussed more fully below).

**Domestic political concerns**

Do state-level explanations give us any purchase in explaining the relative failure of the CIS? Three factors may have some bearing on this question. First, one could argue that, absent Russia as a strong advocate for the CIS, these states lacked the resources to make regionalism work. The CIS has never had a budget to promote economic or security cooperation, and, given the economic difficulties in all states in the 1990s, protectionist temptations proved to be far more powerful than notions to promote free trade and cross-border investment. Secondly, as noted, there was an ‘objective’ need to put state and nation-building first. States wanted to develop their own economies, their own infrastructure, their own security, and their own identity. International cooperation, in many cases, made sense, and bilateral ties were developed to promote functional projects. These, however, allowed more flexibility and were far less burdensome or threatening than a pan-post-Soviet organisation that, if empowered, threatened states’ new-found sovereignty. It is worth mentioning the sub-CIS multilateralism (for example EAEC, GUAM) has also not been particularly successful, thereby supporting an argument that regionalism will work best with more developed, more firmly-established and secure states, not newly

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formed, weak states that are wary of their neighbours and need to focus on developing their own political institutions.\textsuperscript{50} A third perspective, however, asks us not to think of ‘objective’ state interests but instead to focus on more subjective needs of a given state’s political leadership. Although political elites may objectively want a strong state, their primary consideration is likely to be their own political survival. As David noted, leaders in weaker states with an uncertain or weak domestic base for support will ‘omnibalance’ against outside and internal political threats.\textsuperscript{51} Several analysts find such logic persuasive when looking at the behaviour of post-Soviet states toward Russia and the CIS. Philip Roeder, writing in the 1990s, argued that post-Soviet elites’ narrow concern about political survival helped explain why some states have \textit{de facto} accepted Russian hegemony.\textsuperscript{52} His answer, in short, was that those elites that depended upon Russia have been the biggest boosters of the CIS. Contrary both to notions of Russia somehow strong-arming states to produce regional cooperation and the state-building type of explanation offered above, Roeder maintained that ‘several Soviet successor governments seem to be rushing to limit their states’ sovereignty’.\textsuperscript{53} Looking at the issue in the late 2000s, the behavior of specific states has changed (for example Georgia no longer pursues integration with Russia, as Roeder claimed), but the underlying dynamic has not, as noted by Eric Miller and Arkady Toritsyn in a recent examination of Ukrainian and Uzbek foreign policy.\textsuperscript{54} More generally, those leaders who depend upon Russia for economic or security needs, not coincidentally usually those who do not rule democratically,\textsuperscript{55} are joining with Russia in groups such as the EAEC and SCO. Turkmenistan, as noted above, is somewhat an exception given that country’s disdain for multilateral organisations, but Turkmen leaders have recently strengthened bilateral ties to Russia. On the other hand, the more democratically-inclined post-Soviet states – with Azerbaijan being somewhat the exception – whose leaders do not depend upon Moscow for their political survival have been the ones least enamoured of the CIS. One cannot, of course, easily disentangle the effects of geopolitical pluralism, which can reduce post-Soviet elites’ political dependence upon Russia, and Russia’s own actions in fostering anti-CIS feelings, but the change of heart exhibited by Uzbek leader Islam Karimov in the 2000s is instructive. After embracing improved ties with the US after 9/11 as a way to balance against Russia, he then turned back to Russia in 2005 once he became concerned about his own domestic opposition (which he ruthlessly crushed) and American support for democratisation. This example gives strong support to domestic political calculations as conditioning support for CIS regionalism.\textsuperscript{56} 

\textsuperscript{50} This claim is made by Olcott et al. (1999), p. 29.
\textsuperscript{51} David (1991).
\textsuperscript{55} Armenia might be the exception here, but the clampdown on protests after 2008 elections there may lead one to question that government’s commitment to liberal norms.
\textsuperscript{56} Miller and Toritsyn (2005), p. 361.
Constructivist approaches to regionalism, as noted above, devote attention to notions of identity grounded in common values and culture. Regions are thus not determined exclusively by power or interests but ideas and social constructions. The question, in this framework, is thus whether the members of the CIS possessed the ‘cognitive interdependence’ to develop an effective sense of region.

Although the CIS lacks the cohesion of a regional grouping defined by a particular continent (for example EU, the African Union), it had a wealth of material from which it could potentially draw. All members of the CIS shared the common experience of the Soviet Union. There were extensive ties among political elites as well as among general publics, although the Soviet state never completely constructed the ‘new Soviet man’. As the Soviet Union collapsed, political leaders reached out to each other to create the CIS, hoping to preserve many of the ties from the Soviet era. In the mid-1990s, Philip Roeder continued to argue that the post-Soviet space ‘constitutes a distinct international region’.\textsuperscript{57} Another observer, noting the fact that CIS states were built on the remains of the old Soviet framework, contended that there is ‘a widespread consensus on the basic political culture’, a ‘common political language’, and formal and informal ties on all levels among political actors.\textsuperscript{58}

One can debate the validity of these claims. From its inception, the CIS had schisms because different states had different reasons for wanting to belong to it. The Central Asians and Belarussians, as noted, had little domestic mobilisation for independence and wanted to preserve ties to Russia. Ukraine wanted simply to manage its independence from Russia, whereas Moldova, Georgia, and Azerbaijan showed great reluctance to even join the CIS because of their concerns about Russia. One writer notes that, ‘The different concerns of the member states meant that there was no common CIS interest and hence no intellectual foundation underpinning the organization’.\textsuperscript{59}

Even assuming that the above claims about regional cohesion accurately reflected the CIS in the 1990s, they clearly do not correspond to the reality of the 2000s. Some states maintain or are moving back to a Soviet-style system of governance and are fearful of Western political and economic influence. Other states are more democratic and are eagerly courting ties with Europe and the US. The key point is that identities, ideas, and interests, like ‘objective’ features like interdependence, are not fixed. They evolve and are subject to domestic and international political, economic, and social forces. For example, it makes little sense to treat Ukraine as a rational, unified political actor given the fact that Kyiv’s attitude toward Russia and the broader CIS is, as aptly demonstrated during and after the Orange Revolution, contingent upon the nature of its political leadership. At the broader social level, for many post-Soviet citizens the Soviet experience is not evaluated positively and the Soviet Union itself looks, in retrospect, more and more like an empire than a political entity that upheld the principle of friendship of peoples. Elites and publics are drifting apart, as their commonality – ‘post-Soviet’ – denotes a past, not a future. One could even debate the idea that they – literally – share a common language, or, that if they do, it would be

\textsuperscript{57} Roeder (1997), p. 220.  
just as likely English as Russian.\textsuperscript{60} Thus, in many states there is little enthusiasm – at the elite or mass level – to create new powerful or supranational structures that would link these states together, especially given concerns about Russia’s power and intentions. In Russia itself, ideas about Russia’s role in the CIS have also changed over time, becoming more nationalistic both in the later half of the 1990s and 2000s.\textsuperscript{61} In turn, Russian actions, particularly under Putin, have further alienated both political leaders and publics in several CIS states, particularly Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia.

The creation of the CIS, therefore, was historically contingent, a development that made sense at the time to serve as a ‘shock absorber’ against potentially destabilising effects of Soviet dissolution. Its promise of integration, however, was ‘nothing but a great illusion, which turned out to be a most useful instrument of separation’.\textsuperscript{62} Over time, there was less and less – politically, economically, geo-strategically – to hold the CIS together. Invoking the common Soviet experience became less and less relevant, as many states began to move in different directions and sought to overcome that past.

Conclusion

The fact that the CIS ranks as a poorly functioning regional organisation has been apparent for some time. Almost two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it makes less and less sense to think of the post-Soviet space as a coherent region, although the various intra-CIS groupings illustrate that regionalism in some form is not without some hope.

How to explain the failures of the CIS? Several answers suggest themselves, but two explanations weave their way across various strands of the story. The first is rooted in power and geopolitics. To begin, there is no doubt that worries in several states about Russian power have stultified the CIS. Small states in an area where one state has such a preponderance of power would naturally be concerned about the regional hegemon. Add in Russian/Soviet history and contemporary statements and actions by Russian officials, and it is clear why many states wanted to move away from Russia and the shared Soviet past. In the early 1990s, however, they had little choice, and thus the CIS was able to pull together twelve of the fifteen post-Soviet republics. In other words, they could not easily balance against Russia. Over time, however, power dynamics changed with the emergence of geopolitical pluralism, which grew out of both outside interest in the post-Soviet space for economic and security reasons and out of Russia’s relative decline as a major power thanks to economic problems and internal instability in the 1990s. Some states – due to geography, economic resources, pronounced worries over Russian intentions, and/or domestic politics – were more eager or better positioned to forge relations with

\textsuperscript{60} Olcott et al. (1999), p. 30. This author was particularly struck by the fact that during OSCE meetings in Vienna in 2005 to discuss the Azerbaijani elections, the Russian and Belarusian delegations spoke in Russian whereas those from Ukraine, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan spoke in English.

\textsuperscript{61} Nicole Jackson, \textit{Russian Foreign Policy and the CIS} (London: Routledge, 2003).

'outside powers, particularly the US. For such states, developing the CIS makes little sense. Other states, however, remain linked to Russia. For some, the overarching reason may be simple geography (for example compare the relatively pro-Russian position of Kazakhstan, which still relies heavily on Russian pipelines to export its oil, with Azerbaijan, now exporting most of its oil westward); for others, particularly non-democratic leaders, worries about political survival and ‘omnibalancing’ may make ties with Russia more appealing. The two types of states now find themselves members of different regional groupings (for example GUAM and CDC for the former, SCO, CSTO, and EAEC for the latter), whereas the CIS itself has receded in importance.

Beyond power and geopolitics, however, one could also note that the CIS has also suffered from what might be called an existential crisis. After issues emerging from the Soviet collapse were solved, the organisation had no clear *raison d’etre*. Members had differing visions for the organisation and of their own future, whereas the ties that made the CIS an ‘objective necessity’ were rooted in the past, a past many wanted to overcome. Interdependencies weakened, again thanks to geopolitical pluralism, obviating the need for CIS-wide cooperation or integration. Much of this, of course, was inevitable, as the post-Soviet states were so tightly bound with each other in 1991–1992 that some unravelling was unavoidable, even necessary. The larger point, however, is that there was insufficient political will to give a solid shape or identity to the CIS. It could, at best, serve only a limited functional role and did not have enough political, ideological, or cultural glue to keep its twelve members together in a cohesive organisation, let alone create a ‘spiritual unity’ among its peoples, as stated in its Charter. Instead, states sought out new alignments or formed intra-CIS blocs that better reflected and served their interests, and domestic leaders who advocated movement away from Russia and the CIS found domestic support for these positions.

This is not to say, of course, that regionalism *per se* is doomed in the post-Soviet space. Russian hegemony over certain states, combined with political incentives for local political leaders, may give life to organisations such as the CSTO or EAEC, and China seems to be intent to develop the SCO into a political, economic, and security bloc. The question at this point for these states is whether multilateral actions and institutions will eclipse bilateral ties in importance. The record to date in the post-Soviet space is not encouraging. Meanwhile, GUAM probably has less likelihood to develop as a cohesive regional grouping, in part because of geography but also because its members put a higher priority on working with and perhaps joining European and trans-Atlantic organisations. The CIS as a whole, however, seems almost anachronistic and frequently irrelevant to political, economic, and security considerations in the post-Soviet space, an area that has lost much of what would denote it as a distinct ‘region’ in international relations.