

What Chance for the CIS?

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Analysts in Kazakhstan say the Commonwealth of Independent States, CIS, needs to become less all-encompassing if it is to continue to exist – and member states will have to start honouring the obligations they undertake as part of the post-Soviet grouping.

A CIS summit in Minsk postponed from October 16 to November 29 is due to discuss the practical steps that could be taken to turn the grouping around.

At the last, informal summit, held in July, Kazak president Nursultan Nazarbaev outlined a new plan for reform after his fellow CIS members asked him to design a strategy. His plan envisages that all CIS members would speak as one on international matters, establish a shared defence zone, and focus on five key areas of cooperation: migration, transport, education, humanitarian affairs and “pressing matters of the day”.

Analysts interviewed by NBCentralAsia identified several key issues that need to be looked at if the reform is to succeed.

“One of the CIS’s major defects is that it is too all-embracing,” said Marat Shaikhutdinov, deputy head of the Kazak president’s Foreign Policy Centre. “A host of diverse issues were shoved into one single organisation, and this and other reasons led to the Commonwealth expanding sideways rather than growing in weight.”

This is probably the reason why a common economic zone, a currency union and a joint defence structure have been constantly discussed but never actually set up in the 15 years that the CIS has existed. Other multilateral organisations have been set up instead: the Eurasian Economic Union, dealing with trade and energy cooperation; the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, a defence grouping; and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which is concerned with joint action on international affairs and regional security.

Apart from having too broad a remit, the CIS has suffered because Moscow’s dominant role has drawn comparisons with the old Soviet Union. Member countries preoccupied with building themselves up as independent states have been wary of the association, and have simply ignored many CIS agreements.

“The main problem with the CIS is that many of its agreements, especially those concerning economics and customs arrangements, still exist only on paper. Each member state accedes to them, but de facto it pursues whatever policies it feels like,” said Berik Abdygaliev, director of Kazakhstan’s Institute for National Studies.

A reformed CIS will work as long as its members actually start fulfilling everything they have signed up to, he added.

However, there are other experts, for example Magbat Spanov, an economist who heads Kazakhstan’s Institute for Development, who believe that the reform is pointless. The reason the CIS was created, Spanov argues, was to see the former Soviet republics through a civilised divorce – and that has been

successfully completed.

(News Briefing Central Asia draws comment and analysis from a broad range of political observers across the region.)

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