

'What is to be done with the Red Army?' from Le Monde (17 February 1992)

Caption: On 16 February 1992, following the Summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) held in Minsk, Belarus, the French daily newspaper Le Monde speculates on the future of the Soviet Red Army.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. LESOURNE, Jacques. 16-17.02.1992, n° 14.636; 49e année. Paris: Le Monde. "Que faire de l'armée rouge ?", p. 1.

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Last updated: 05/07/2016

What is to be done with the Red Army?

Is the glass half empty or half full? The outcome of the most recent summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in Minsk gives cause both for pessimism in some quarters and hope in others.

The former will point out that, despite the fine words from Mr Kravchuk, the Ukrainian President, about the 'constructive and friendly' atmosphere at the talks, little progress seems to have been made on the main issues. Even the imminent signing of 20, as yet unpublished, treaties cannot dispel the scepticism, since Minsk and Alma-Ata clearly showed what can happen when their wording is vague and open to interpretation. The latter will note that no split occurred and that that, in itself, is not a bad outcome, given the enormous challenges involved in dismantling an empire.

The problem of defence alone has no historical precedent. The Soviet Army was and remains the largest army in the world in terms of troop numbers, its conventional weapons and even its nuclear arsenal, which has 30 000 warheads. Not only is this army still overwhelmingly 'red' and, hence, a threat to democracy, but, as the only surviving entity of the federal system, its very existence represents a threat to the non-Russian Republics in the CIS.

Even the far less controversial idea of a military alliance would not fully resolve the problem. First, because the only relevant precedent in the region is the Warsaw Pact, laden with bad memories, and then because any alliance necessarily has a leading player, whose dominance is not always easy to tolerate. America has managed it, more or less, within NATO, but that was because, having liberated Europe from one tyranny, it stood as the bulwark against the subsequent tyranny that benighted Eastern Europe. No threat of this nature faces the Soviet empire, certainly not from the United States, now that they are 'friends'.

For all these reasons, even in the best-case scenario, the CIS will never be more than a structure of variable geometry. If, under Western pressure, everyone agrees to avoid the spread of the nuclear weapons, only some of the Asian republics appear ready to accept 'combined armed forces', particularly in the broad terms envisaged by the chiefs of staff in Moscow.

There is still the question of whether the officer corps will accept the inevitable break-up of the 'monster'. After all, has not their 'trade union', set up last month in Moscow, reminded the Heads of State of their old promises made in Minsk and Alma-Ata? Their attitude will determine not only the fate of the old Red Army but also that of the CIS.