

Cooperative Security — principle and reality

Wolfgang Zellner¹

DOI: [10.1163/187502310791305981](https://doi.org/10.1163/187502310791305981)

¹ Dr. Wolfgang Zellner is Deputy Director of the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (IFSH) and Head of its Centre for OSCE Research (CORE).

The first decade of the 21st century was largely lost with regards to Cooperative Security policy (not only) in Europe. As the then OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, the Greek Foreign Minister Dora Bakoyannis, put it in her opening remarks at the Corfu Ministerial Council meeting in June 2009: ‘Over the last ten years, European security policy has been increasingly dominated by unilateral and frequently confrontational approaches. This is a far cry from the principle of co-operative security, to which the OSCE States committed themselves in the 1990 Charter of Paris’. This was particularly true for US foreign policy during the two terms of the Bush administration, but has also increasingly been the case for Russia’s foreign policy behaviour since 2000, when Vladimir Putin became President. As a result, Russia and the West are in dispute over nearly every major European security policy item. The fact that European security questions have lost relevance compared to security problems outside of Europe, has not improved this situation, but has added an element of unproductive neglect.

Against this background, it might be worthwhile to reconsider the principle

of Cooperative Security, to analyze the relationship between this principle and its implementation, and the different causes and consequences non-implementation may have in various problem areas, as well as to draw some conclusions for the current security dialogue within the OSCE — the Corfu process.

The normative starting point of the concept of Cooperative Security, enshrined in every major OSCE document, is that ‘each participating State has an equal right to security’. That corresponds to the understanding ‘that security is indivisible and that the security of each (...) is inseparably linked to the security of all (...)’. Consequently, States have pledged that ‘they will not strengthen their security at the expense of the security of other States². These norms aim at ruling out different levels of security in different parts of the OSCE area. Together, this was and still is a revolutionary approach, because it breaks with the ages-old and still widely practised principle that one can only gain what somebody else has lost. The need to overcome this zero-sum logic has an objective basis, which is formulated in the ‘Charter for European Security’ as follows: ‘The risks and challenges we face today cannot be met by a single State or organization’. (Para. 12). This means that the network of mutual interdependence has become strong enough that even major powers cannot act alone on a growing number of questions. This is even more evident today than it was in 1999, when we think about problems such as the financial crisis, climate change and the corresponding need for a new energy system — all of them challenges that can only be addressed on the basis of cooperative policies.

However, there is no simple way to translate the principle of Cooperative Security into political reality. Some states are more exposed to certain conflicts, risks and threats than others and consequently they might be more engaged and in a different manner. Another reason for these differences is that states are at different levels of their general political development and thus have different perceptions of key principles such as stability or democracy. And of course, there are also deliberate political attempts to make extra gains at the cost of the security of others by using unilateral or even confrontational approaches. In the following we will look at some specific problem areas inquiring into the specific causes of non-implementation of the principle of Cooperative Security.

A first category of problems involves intra-state conflicts, which are frequently, but not always, of an ethno-

2 OSCE, Istanbul Summit, 19 November 1999, Charter for European Security (SUM.DOC/1/99), para. 8. OSCE documents are available at the OSCE website: <http://www.osce.org>.

political nature. Each and every violent conflict, as well as its broader consequences, represents a case of different levels of security. Within the conflict area, people suffer. States outside the conflict area are affected to various degrees and with different intensities. Neighbouring states, for example, have to receive refugees, others do not. States look with particular interest at minorities of their own ethnic kin living in other states with a view to protecting them and may, thus, easily become involved in a conflict. All in all, states are involved to different degrees and consequently have different interests and follow different strategies of conflict management. In such situations, it is particularly tempting to overstress one's own narrow interests and to seek extra gains at the cost of equal and common security of all states. Of course, this kind of unilateral approach only exacerbates already existing different levels of security. To avoid such unilateral approaches, the High Commissioner on National Minorities has published the 'Bolzano/Bozen Recommendations on National Minorities in Inter-State Relations' that contain norms for state behaviour related to one's ethnic kin. Unfortunately, these and other sets of HCNM's recommendations are not even politically binding.

A special situation arises when certain entities are not recognized as states by all participating States. Kosovo, which is recognized by many but not by all states, is a case in point. Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the independence of which is only recognized by one participating State each and not by the other 55, are even more pronounced cases. With unrecognized territories, the problem of different levels of security has become particularly obvious: These entities have no membership in international organizations. Consequently, they have not taken on international commitments and obligations as normal states do. And this leads to a situation in which the populations of these entities as well as these entities themselves are much less protected under international law than recognized states. Thus, we can say that unrecognized quasi-states represent one of the most difficult cases of different levels of security.

A second problem area involves transnational threats and challenges. In principle, transnational threats are global in character and affect all states. On a more concrete level, however, their impact differs substantially from region to region, and from country to country. To take one simple example: If the security situation in Afghanistan were to worsen further, the states most directly concerned would be those in Central Asia plus Pakistan, and certainly the Russian Federation, whereas the consequences for states situated in Western Europe would be less grave. Thus, it is not enough to refrain from unilateral approaches. What is necessary beyond that is a course of active solidarity or effective multilateralism, to use a key term of EU language. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that Cooperative Security is not free and is much more than refraining from something.

A third and sometimes very difficult problem area involves the membership of participating States in different regional and international organizations. According to OSCE norms, states do have the right to belong to different organizations, including security organizations. To quote the Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security: 'The participating States each have the sovereign right to belong or not to belong to international organizations' (para. 11). And the Charter for European Security speaks about the 'inherent right of each and every participating State to be free to choose or change its security arrangements, including treaties of alliance' (para. 8). The right to freely choose one's own security arrangement is not necessary in contradiction to the principle of Cooperative Security. Problems are likely to arise when different perceptions exist on whether the accession of certain states to certain security organizations represents security gains for all states or a violation of the security interests of specific states – as exemplified in the case of NATO enlargement. The problem of different perceptions points to an important lesson: The principle of Cooperative Security as such remains irrelevant as long as it cannot be translated into politics. And there is no easy,

automatic or objective way to make Cooperative Security fruitful and practical. Thus, the principle cannot replace well-balanced, and one might even say wise politics, frequently based on compromises. And the policy machine for doing this, every Thursday in the Permanent Council, which is — at least in principle — capable of transforming different perceptions into agreed solutions, is the core of Cooperative Security.

The problem of (non-) integration into international organizations is not an abstract one. In the European context it primarily involves relations between Russia and the West. Thus, one can only agree with Rose Gottemoeller, US Assistant Secretary of State, who, in an article, published before she joined the US government, wrote that one key task would be ‘no less than trying to correct the major problem that went unresolved at the end of the Cold War: how to weave Russia, and Russian security interests, into the full fabric of European Security’. This is the current key problem of European security policy.

Closely related to the issue of membership of different security organizations is a fourth problem area, namely arms control. In the 1994 Code of Conduct, paragraph 15 reads as follows: ‘The participating States will implement in good faith each of their commitments in the field of arms control, disarmament and confidence- and security-building as an important element of their indivisible security’. However, as we have seen in the case of the CFE Treaty, agreement on the principle is not necessarily sufficient to overcome different political perceptions. Both Russia and the NATO member states confirm that they continue to support the CFE regime. However, Russia puts the blame on the NATO States for not having ratified the Adapted CFE Treaty; while the NATO States blame Russia for not withdrawing its armed forces from Georgia and Moldova and for suspending the CFE Treaty. Thus, different perceptions prevent a joint solution in the spirit of Cooperative Security.

The only conclusion we can safely draw at this stage is that if CFE fails, this will lead to very different levels of security in the OSCE area. And, most probably, the consequences of a possible failure of CFE would not be limited to the treaty as such, but would also affect other areas of arms control such as the Vienna Document or sub-regional arms control agreements such as the 1996 Florence Agreement. And even the OSCE as an organization that represents the principle of Cooperative Security and under the umbrella of which CFE is situated, could be damaged, at least in an indirect way.

The fifth, and by no means least important issue area relevant for Cooperative Security involves the human dimension. In its 1991 Moscow Document, the CSCE directly linked the human to the security dimension saying that ‘full respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and the development of societies based on pluralistic democracy and the rule of law are prerequisites for a lasting order of peace, security, justice and co-operation in Europe’. It is precisely for this reason that States ‘categorically and irrevocably declare[d] that the commitments undertaken in the field of the human dimension of the CSCE are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the State concerned’. These statements have lost nothing of their relevance. Thus, Cooperative Security cannot be reduced to ‘hard-security’ issues, however important these might be.

With these considerations in mind, one could draw some conclusions for the future security dialogue and cooperation among the OSCE states.

First. Principles can only bear fruit in concrete conflicts and disputes. An isolated discussion on principles will not enhance Cooperative Security. Therefore, the discussion on principles should be as closely linked as possible to efforts at concrete problem-solving. However, problem-solving activities should always be related

back to the principled commitments the OSCE States have entered into. Thus, it is very welcome that the OSCE states decided at their December 2009 Athens Ministerial Council meeting to further the Corfu Process³. Less productive, however, is that the substance of this decision goes only slightly beyond what was already practised in the Corfu process between September and November 2009.

Second, until now there have been no proposals of new principles or commitments to guide the behaviour of states in dealing with one another. This also holds true for the draft European Security Treaty published by the Russian President Dmitri Medvedev on 29 November 2009⁴ that represents a new proposal on the form of commitments (legally binding treaty), but not on their substance. If this is the case, the whole debate concerns the form of principles and commitments, the mutual relationships between them and their interpretation. One has to admit that the CSCE principles — as is probably true of any set of principles — are not without their inherent contradictions. The most frequently quoted example is the tension between principle IV – Territorial integrity of states — and principle VIII — Equal rights and self-determination of peoples — of the Helsinki Decalogue. This inherent flaw in the normative construction of European security can only be ameliorated if states agree on common interpretations. This could be one important focus of the current discussion.


However, there are reasons to go beyond that and to consider really new commitments that address conflicts and problems that have, up until now, not been properly addressed at the normative level. One problem area involves the dealings of states with their ethnic kin living in another state. Another involves the principal problem of whether, how and to what degree so-called humanitarian interventions can be legitimized. And finally, there is a lack of norms for dealing with unrecognized entities. Against the background of such loopholes in international law it might be wise not to exclude the option of new OSCE norms and commitments.

Third, different security perceptions and interpretations of principles are — up to a certain degree — normal and even necessary, because states are exposed to different threats in different ways and thus develop different security strategies. Only an ongoing political dialogue and proactive solidarity can ensure that differences do not develop into contradictions, unilateral strategies and conflicts. By contrast to most of the rest of the world, the OSCE states have the instruments necessary for transforming different perceptions, positions and interests into agreed solutions through dialogue and joint action, provided the necessary political will exists. Therefore, states should agree not to close any existing line of communication, particularly not in a crisis. And they should discuss each subject proposed by any state.

Finally, deeds matter more than words. With this in mind, it would be extremely productive if the ongoing debate could be supported by an early breakthrough in one of the disputed issues.

3 Cf. OSCE, MC, Athens, 2 December 2009, Furthering the Corfu Process (MC.DEC/1/09); Ministerial Declaration on the OSCE Corfu Process: Reconfirm-Review-Reinvigorate Security and Co-operation from Vancouver to Vladivostok (MC.DOC/1/09).

4 President of Russia, November 29, 2009, European Security Treaty, at: <http://eng.kremlin.ru/text/docs/2009/11/223072.shtml>



This article was first published with Brill | Nijhoff publishers, and was featured on the Security and Human Rights Monitor (SHRM) website.

Security and Human Rights (formerly Helsinki Monitor) is a journal devoted to issues inspired by the work and principles of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It looks at the challenge of building security through cooperation across the northern hemisphere, from Vancouver to Vladivostok, as well as how this experience can be applied to other parts of the world. It aims to stimulate thinking on the question of protecting and promoting human rights in a world faced with serious threats to security.

Netherlands Helsinki Committee
Het Nutshuis
Riviermarkt 4
2513 AM The Hague
The Netherlands

© Netherlands Helsinki Committee. All rights reserved.

www.nhc.nl