

Collective Security and the politico-military role of the OSCE

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Cooperative security: past and present

In April 1992, the Carnegie Corporation of New York sponsored a conference at Stanford to consider whether the end of the Cold War had opened the way for an era of cooperative security based on multinational action to suppress conflict worldwide². The more sceptical speakers pointed out that even if the USA had lost its chief enemy, plenty of states still saw each other as enemies elsewhere in the world. Europe's own success in cooperative security, and progress towards a wider 'collective security', might still be put to the test as the new Russia and the new Eastern Europe embarked on their transition. Looking back from early 2010, it is hard not to see even these arguments as charmingly optimistic. In the intervening years the USA and the West in general have discovered new enemies such as Al-Qaeda, and new challenges like the rise of China, without putting the old strategic tensions with Russia entirely behind them. A recent US Administration has sought security by starting new conflicts (Afghanistan and Iraq) rather than suppressing them. Along the way, many of the achievements of former East-West relations in Europe, including the high priority given to disarmament, have withered on the vine and the body most identified with cooperative security — the OSCE — finds its authority and *raison d'être* more threatened than in the Cold War's darkest days.

Such paradoxes are easier to find when the underlying concepts are themselves shaky. For a start, cooperative security cannot be simply equated with the CSCE/OSCE legacy or the experiences of Europe as such. The earliest attempts in modern history to organize common action against violations of the peace were made at the global level in the League of Nations and more recently in the United Nations; while many different regions have tried and are still trying to adapt the formula to their own needs. Outside Europe, cooperative regional security is generally interpreted as a move towards inclusive multilateralism through the creation or strengthening of collective, rule-based institutions. Europe with its many criss-crossing organizations may seem well ahead in that respect: but here the institutions themselves have also become part of the problem, when they divide or discriminate among states and compete, overlap with or get in the way of each other. Even the OSCE has had its demarcation disputes with the Council of Europe and European Union in particular. A distinction is thus needed between how advanced the European 'model' is in its experimentation with new intentional governance, and how successful it has been in terms of actual security production.

The Helsinki Legacy

If we ask how the CSCE/OSCE process has sought cooperative security in the specific politico-military dimension, the Helsinki Final Act of 1975³ is the first place to look for the nature, limitations, and possible contradictions of the concept. With hindsight, three things stand out:

Like the UN Charter and understandably given the Cold War confrontation, the Final Act focuses on the avoidance of war or non-military coercion, and hence on correct behaviour and respect for 'sovereign equality and individuality (...) territorial integrity (...) freedom and political independence'⁴ among nation-states. The first, and well-known, potential contradiction this creates is with the possibility of dynamic political change — as also acknowledged and protected in the Final Act. But it also tends to exclude non-state actors and non-state challenges, including internal conflict and the maintenance of internal order, from the 'cooperative' agenda;

2 See: <http://news.stanford.edu/pr/92/920408Arc2318.html>.

3 Text at http://www.osce.org/documents/mcs/1975/08/4044_en.pdf.

4 Terms used in the first of the ten guiding principles of the Final Act.

For similar reasons, most politico-military commitments created by the Final Act (and later additions to the corpus) involve ‘refraining’ from something (threat or use of force, intervention, coercion etc.) that might disturb the status quo, rather than committing states to work positively and create something new together. The main actions called for relate to confidence building measures, also geared essentially to conflict avoidance, and the attempt to solve disputes by other more peaceful means. This culture of avoidance or ‘negative peace’ is consistent with the 20th-century origins of the cooperative security idea, but it largely lacks the notion of active and creative security building that has come to dominate the post-Cold War agenda;

The Final Act also calls for positive actions towards ‘lessening military confrontation and promoting disarmament’ in Europe, against the background of broader UN commitments. Just as the whole concept of confidence and security building measures (CSBMs) assumes that armed force activities are inherently risky and provocative, the CSCE/OSCE process treats armaments as inherently problematic and causally linked to Europe’s own legacy of conflict. This approach has made it difficult to ‘capture’ within the CSCE/OSCE framework other purposes and uses of military capabilities such as internal security and deployments outside Europe — two of the more problematic issues in OSCE states’ actual behaviour since 1989 especially.

Finally, the Final Act was ahead of its time in creating and trying to balance three ‘baskets’, but was a prisoner of its time in failing to connect the three organically. One of the recent complaints put forward by Russia and like-minded states has been about a relative devaluing of OSCE’s politico-military dimension (Basket One) compared with the pursuit of democratic change and individual rights (part of Basket Three). It might have been easier to avoid both such criticism and what led to it if the CSCE process had focussed earlier on the interdependence of good national and international governance in the spheres of comprehensive security, economic development, and democracy and human rights. The links between these are today stressed almost ad nauseam when it comes to analysing conflicts and peace-building outside Europe, and they are skilfully combined in newer regional charters such as the founding documents of the African Union (2002)⁵. Yet within the OSCE area it has been curiously difficult to build an operative model of ‘human’ or ‘societal’ security that would combine them all — not least, because different institutions with different memberships have assumed the leading role in each.

An OSCE score-sheet

A critical review of how the Helsinki legacy has played out in the politico- military dimension since 1975 needs to ask two questions. First, how well has CSCE/OSCE done in building cooperative security within the limited terms of its mandate, and in overcoming those limitations when they were part of the problem? Second, what other good or bad developments have determined what might be called the overall audit of cooperative security in Europe today, and how have they affected OSCE’s relative standing?

At the macro-level and compared with other parts of the world, CSCE/OSCE can claim one huge success. It did help to avoid war between the large powers and war over any large part of its area, not just during the Cold War confrontation but also during the collapse of the Soviet bloc and Soviet Union, and during all the ups and downs of the post-Cold War period. It did not prevent several years of bloody war in the Western Balkans, or the frozen and chronic conflicts within the former Soviet area, or the Georgia/Russia clash of August 2008; but it did help to ensure that all these were strategically contained, while most OSCE nations sought only

⁵ See http://www.africa-union.org/Official_documents/Treaties_%20Conventions%20Protocols/offTreaties_Conventions_&_Protocols.htm.

to help resolve them. In the process OSCE has developed an active role in post-conflict administration and reconstruction, notably in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. It has undoubtedly helped avoid armed conflict in several other zones of tension, through tools such as the High Commissioner on National Minorities and a whole range of field missions and similar activities, as well as by its general 'process effects'. Finally, it is one of the few places where state and non-state actors can continue to communicate even while their governments are in open conflict. These are the achievements people in other regions remember when they dream of an OSCE-equivalent of their own.

The CSCE/OSCE CSBM regimes have been steadily elaborated and successfully applied for the most part, including the major addition of the Open Skies Treaty (1992)⁶. They have taught important lessons about transparency, military accountability and reform, not just in the old 'East.' The trouble is that they have neither avoided nor limited any conflicts and states have often dropped them precisely in conflict and pre-conflict conditions. This 'fair-weather' character is one major weakness of the confidence building method. The other is that — as defined in the CSCE acquis — it does not cover many of the policy areas and actions that have proved most destabilizing in actual security relationships, especially since 1989.

The disarmament story is one of great ups and downs. In 1992, when the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) regime came into force, limiting numbers both of manpower (CFE -1 Agreement) and key major weapons (CFE Treaty), it was the most advanced arms control regime any continent had seen: but the levels of national forces were dropping even faster throughout the region in consequence of post-Cold War relaxation. Today, across Europe the total armed force manpower of Treaty signatories is 60% lower and holdings of all Treaty Limited Equipment 50% lower than in 1992. Local arms limitations have worked particularly well in the Western Balkans after the Dayton Agreement. However, the Adapted version of the CFE Treaty signed in 1999 has never come into force, and Russia, since 2007, has suspended implementation of the CFE regime, as a result of East-West disagreements tied to the largely separate dynamics of Russian force stationing in Georgia and Moldova⁷. Moreover, since the later 1990s the trend of military spending cuts has stopped or been reversed both in the NATO/EU area and in Eastern Europe. More new than old members of the Western institutions have committed themselves to the norm of spending 2% of GDP on defence. Yet, around half of all member-states increased spending from 2006 to 2007⁸ and during the period 1999-2008, West and Central Europe overall raised spending by approximately 0.5% a year. Russia and its neighbours in the western FSU and Caucasus have increased spending by around 17% a year — a world record! — and the USA by around 6% a year over the same period⁹.

The OSCE participating states thus account for roughly three quarters of the whole world's military spending today. Moreover, in 2007 they accounted for US \$328.8 billion out of the total US \$ 346.9 billion trade in

6 Zdzislaw Lachowski, 'Confidence- and Security-Building Measures in the New Europe', SIPRI Research Report No18, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2004

7 'Die Waffen und der Mensch: Die Rätsel der Kontrolle'/'Arms and the Man: the Conundrums of Control', opening chapter in Die Zukunft konventioneller Rüstungskontrolle in Europa/'The Future of Conventional Arms Control in Europe, eds. Wolfgang Zellner, Hans-Joachim Schmidt and Götz Neuneck, Nomos Verlag, Baden-Baden June 2009.

8 For details see Alyson Bailes' presentation to OSCE's 2008 Annual Security Review Conference, at http://www.osce.org/documents/html/pdftohtml/31769_en.pdf.html.

9 All figures are in real terms and taken from 'Military Expenditure' by Sam Perlo-Freeman, Catalina Perdomo, Petter Stålenheim and Elisabeth Sköns in SIPRI Yearbook 2009: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security, OUP: Oxford, 2009 (also online at www.sipri.org).

armaments conducted by the world's top 100 companies — and Russia's share of that total was only US \$8.2 billion¹⁰.¹⁰ These figures call in question the CSCE/OSCE route to cooperative security in two respects. Either they mean that arms levels can be de-linked from regional peace, and so the Final Act's emphasis was misplaced; or they hint that significant intra-OSCE strategic tensions are still driving states towards deterrence through military reinsurance. The answer is probably a bit of both.

Finally, CSCE/OSCE has made real efforts to move beyond the Final Act's narrow definition of cooperative security. The Code of Conduct for military forces negotiated in 1994 covers several aspects relating to internal order and military democracy rather than just inter-state stabilization. Since the early 1990s and with the help of the new Forum for Security Cooperation (created 1992), OSCE has transcended the purely 'negative' peace concept by addressing security topics where participating states need not see each other as the enemy but can band together against a common challenge — often of non-state or non-human origin. Thus a joint policy was agreed in 2000 on small arms which are no longer militarily important in a larger East-West context, and since 1993 all OSCE states have agreed on responsible guidelines for arms exports in general. From 2001, the global terrorist threat and new focus on non-state actors spurred an examination of the relevance of all OSCE politico-military commitments to combat these scourges, and joint positions were agreed against WMD proliferation (the latter, alas, with little effect). At conceptual level, the OSCE's 2003 'Strategy to Address Threats to Security and Stability in the Twenty-First Century'¹¹ embraced all these issues and linked them with conflict causation and management as well as the protection of human rights and values, thus achieving some of the synthesis between the concerns of different Baskets that had eluded the drafters of Helsinki. In such new dimensions, the barriers to OSCE success have been not intellectual but related to its lack of law-making power, hard military assets, meaningful financial resources, and global outreach to translate its precepts into practice. The institutions that can deploy such assets, especially the EU, have outstripped and overshadowed OSCE in tackling the 'new threats' — while benefiting not a little from OSCE's normative underpinning, and from the wider, if weaker, geographical zone of collaboration it creates.

The big picture

The larger story of post-Cold War changes in Europe, and the challenges they have posed both for OSCE and its original vision of cooperative security, may be summed up quite shortly. First, the emphasis in security making has shifted massively from restraint and non-interference to positive joint action and mutual interpenetration in the framework of the enlarged NATO and EU, which between them now cover 34 European states (with 3 more semi-integrated in the European Economic Area). Secondly, the members of these groups have adopted new agendas requiring new types and increased levels of military operations, in the Western Balkans and outside Europe, which in turn explain most of the resurgence in their defence spending and also provide the stated reason for the US opening new troop transit bases in Central and South-East Europe¹²

The Russian Federation, meanwhile, has not shared and been changed by either the enhanced integration

¹⁰ 'Arms Production' by Sam Perlo-Freeman in SIPRI Yearbook 2009, as note 7 above.

¹¹ Published 2 December 2003, text at http://www.osce.org/documents/html/pdftohtml/17499_en.pdf.html.


¹² The reference is to bases established in Bulgaria and Poland in connection with the logistical needs of US operations in the greater Middle East — see Z. Lachowski, 'Foreign Military Bases in Eurasia', SIPRI Policy Paper no 18 of June 2007, text at http://books.sipri.org/product_info?c_product_id=339. The USA's proposed missile defence bases in Poland and the Czech Republic were also linked to a supposed non-European threat (Iranian nuclear capability), but were interpreted by Russia — and perhaps also by the host countries — as more significant for the East-West strategic balance.

process or the new global military activism, but has remained preoccupied with holding down its own territory and seeking strategic mastery over post-Soviet neighbours both with and without their consent. This Russian combination of defensive and coercive action (including economic blackmail) offends the West both by its style and effects. Russia in turn sees both the enlargement process as such, and many Western actions inspired by the new global agenda, as damaging to its own national security, regional ambitions and general standing. Finally, while the overall trend since the mid-1990s has been towards the ending or freezing of European conflicts, the subsequent peace-building process has taken on a divided and partisan character: with the Balkan ex-conflict parties fast becoming Western 'property' (vide the story of Kosovo's independence), and the West remaining a largely ineffectual bystander in the dynamics of conflict on post-Soviet soil.

The mismatch is also clear between this new picture, CSCE's seminal security concepts, and OSCE's present competences. Russia and the NATO/EU 'empire' now share boundaries and negotiate directly on many things where CSCE/OSCE used to mediate. Strategic nuclear weapons aside, they are no longer developing their militaries for comparable purposes, do not fear each other quite enough to be driven to arms control, but do not trust each other enough to cut back their territorial efforts. The new 'grey zone' of influence between them is in the western former Soviet Union, a set of states that did not even exist when CSCE was created, and where conflict and governance problems persist that have baffled the best efforts of much stronger powers and institutions.

In sum, compared with the 1970s, security cooperation within 'blocs' has soared to undreamed-of heights and extended throughout the three CSCE baskets and beyond. But between the major powers of East and West in the OSCE area and their respective groupings, there is less of a common agenda today and less acceptance of shared disciplines to preserve peace — in part exactly because their close and balanced mutual confrontation has dissolved. In those dimensions where some common threat is still felt by all, the main action is not in OSCE but usually involves the EU and often the UN Security Council (or G8/G20).

Neither a concept nor an institution created for the Cold War's unique needs, and which did remarkably well in meeting those needs, can fairly be attacked for not hitting the spot twenty years later. Yet some of Europe's toughest problems today might have been eased, had the original CSCE ideas of restraint, understanding and risk avoidance vis-à-vis the 'other' not been jettisoned so hastily and if more effort had been made to update them. With a more reflective and risk-averse leadership in Washington, the time is ripe for a critical and open-minded re-visiting of the cooperative security agenda. The so-called 'Corfu process' launched in mid-2009 offers one more opening both to respond to Russia's demands regarding a new 'security architecture' and to salvage the OSCE including its politico-military dimension. If in the end OSCE is found to be not the best or only framework fit for purpose, so be it; for perhaps it never was.



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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.

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