

The relevance and effectiveness of the concept of Cooperative Security in the 21st century

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Cooperative Security arrangements are not new. In a broad sense they go back at least as far as the Roman concept of *ius gentium* and, in a way, even farther back, to the Delian and Delphic Leagues in ancient Greece, if not farther. But they have certainly taken on a more concrete and particular form over the past several centuries.

The nineteenth-century Concert of Europe was one such arrangement. Like the present-day OSCE, it was the outgrowth of a 'Final Act' — in this case, the Final Act of Vienna. And just as the OSCE had to await the end of the Cold War before it could form itself into a simulacrum of an international (and regional security) organization, so the Concert of Europe could not begin until Napoleon was decisively defeated. As Strobe Talbott puts it in his book *The Great Experiment*: 'Once Napoleon was truly and finally out of the way, the Final Act— inscribed in a bound volume, and ratified with the signatures and red seals of the attending plenipotentiaries — created a mechanism, the Congress system, which would be convened some thirty times over a period of decades, thereby institutionalizing diplomacy-by-conference and prefiguring some of the forms, purposes, benefits, and limitations of twentieth-century multilateralism'.

The OSCE, too, embodies a form of the Congress system. It is also diplomacy-by-conference. Of course, the differences between it and the Concert of Europe are not insignificant — the latter, for one, met only during times of crisis, while the OSCE meets constantly in order to fend off crisis — but at bottom both arrangements rested or rest on a notion of consensual cooperation and direct dialogue among nation-states. Then as now, not everyone applauded this. When the series of congresses that followed the Treaty of Vienna of 1815 finally came to an end, the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Canning, was said to have breathed a sigh of relief at his return to normal bilateral diplomacy. He reputedly described bilateral diplomacy, as 'each for himself and God for us all'.

One half of his equation, 'each for himself', is the opposite of that which animates Cooperative Security organizations. But if Canning is correct — and if it is not blasphemous to say so — then the other half may be growing more secular. In other words, Cooperative Security may be usurping God's previous role in international diplomacy. The animating spirit of the OSCE is — or at least ought to be — 'we're all in this together'.

The OSCE relies upon what it calls 'political dialogue' as the means to create this fellow-feeling and thus to prevent conflict and manage crises. Such political dialogue in theory takes place with perfect equality among the organization's five- six participating States. In fact, however, some of these states are unavoidably larger and more powerful and perhaps therefore more influential than others. This can have its disadvantages even — or perhaps especially — in an organization that relies on consensus for its decision-making.

Even so, multilateral diplomatic dialogue can still prove preferable to bilateral discourse, for the latter, if done badly or baldly or both, may put smaller states in mind of what, according to Thucydides, the mighty Athenians told the inhabitants of the little island of Melos in what has come to be known as 'The Melian Dialogue':

Melians: 'You may be sure that we are as well aware as you of the difficulty of contending against your power and fortune, unless the terms be equal. But we trust that the gods may grant us fortune as good as yours, since we are just men fighting against unjust, and that what we want in power will be made up by the alliance of the Lacedaemonians, who are bound, if only for very shame, to come to the aid of their

kindred. Our confidence, therefore, after all is not so utterly irrational’.

Athenians: ‘When you speak of the favour of the gods, we may as fairly hope for that as yourselves; neither our pretensions nor our conduct being in any way contrary to what men believe of the gods, or practise among themselves. Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can. And it is not as if we were the first to make this law, or to act upon it when made: we found it existing before us, and shall leave it to exist for ever after us; all we do is to make use of it, knowing that you and everybody else, having the same power as we have, would do the same as we do. Thus, as far as the gods are concerned, we have no fear and no reason to fear that we shall be at a disadvantage. But when we come to your notion about the Lacedaemonians, which leads you to believe that shame will make them help you, here we bless your simplicity but do not envy your folly. The Lacedaemonians, when their own interests or their country’s laws are in question, are the worthiest men alive; of their conduct towards others much might be said, but no clearer idea of it could be given than by shortly saying that of all the men we know they are most conspicuous in considering what is agreeable honourable, and what is expedient just. Such a way of thinking does not promise much for the safety which you now unreasonably count upon’.

The gods, in the Athenians’ view, are clearly not ‘for us all’ but rather on the side of the more powerful. Self-interest rules. This is often the way things went in the past. It is probably why nation-states (and city-states before them) began to band together — to ward off the depredations of the strong. Surely, too, it is from this that the concepts of both collective and Cooperative Security sprang.

Cooperative Security, then, if it works as it should, ought to prevent precisely this kind of dialogue — or at least keep it from getting out of hand and

leading to the sort of violence the Melians encountered at the hands of the Athenians — and enlist the gods on the side of peaceful conflict resolution instead. But, of course, even in the most harmonious Cooperative Security organizations it does not always work out this way. Presumably this is why the OSCE also lists ‘post-conflict rehabilitation’ as one of its particular specialties.

In the past two decades, a number of conflicts burst forth within the OSCE space. Some, but not many, of these were between nation-states. Far more occurred within such states, especially when larger unions of states began to fall apart. The latter kind of conflict seems, in fact, to be the predominant kind of the contemporary era, though quite often outside actors also aid one or both of the parties to such conflicts.


This should not necessarily be seen as a failure of Cooperative Security. The response to such conflicts — that is, the OSCE’s stated specialties of ‘conflict resolution’ and ‘post-conflict rehabilitation’ — matters far more. If one can judge by the interjection of mediators, observers, and increasingly large field missions into areas of conflict, the OSCE’s responses a decade ago were prompter and more efficacious than they have been in this decennium. But this diminution in the organization’s utility, if such it is, says more about the fraying of consensus within the organization than it does about the relevance of the concept of Cooperative Security in the twenty-first century. Something can, after all, be relevant without necessarily being efficient — and vice versa.

As long as the concept of Cooperative Security remains relevant, if not entirely effective, Europe probably does

not need another security arrangement. Thanks to its current plethora of regional organizations — from the European Council to the Council of Europe; from the OSCE to the CTSO — it surely already has enough to go around. All these organizations, however different their animating concepts, strive in one way or another to maintain security in the regions they cover.

But within this plenitude of organizations, the OSCE does retain a unique role. It is one grounded precisely in its ‘comprehensive concept of security’, which, by uniting the political-military and economic and the human dimensions of security in a cooperative fashion, goes beyond what most other continental security organizations seek to do both geographically and philosophically. But for Europe, as the OSCE broadly defines it, to remain (or become) secure and prosperous in the future, it will require a continued and even strengthened fealty on the part of all of the organizations’ participating States to the principles of Cooperative Security that undergird the OSCE and to the web of related commitments woven ever more tightly since the Helsinki Final Act was signed in 1976. Without that, no amount of ‘continuous political dialogue’, as the Melians might attest, will make much difference.





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