

From Corfu to Astana: The way to the 2010 OSCE summit

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On 3 August 2010, the OSCE Ministerial Council (MC) decided to convene an OSCE summit meeting in Astana on 1 and 2 December 2010,² the first of its kind since the 1999 Istanbul Summit. This was preceded by an informal Ministerial Council meeting in Almaty/Kazakhstan on 16/17 July, where a corresponding consensus was reached. After a decade of growing tensions, this opens up a great opportunity for the participating States to address profoundly changed threats and challenges on the basis of a re-established cooperative security approach. For Kazakhstan, a country which was long seen by many in the West as being too immature and unreliable to carry off an OSCE chairmanship, the Astana Summit means final recognition as a strategically relevant player.

This article follows the development from the 2008 Helsinki MC meeting via the informal MC meeting in Corfu in June 2009 to the 2009 Athens MC, and further to Almaty. It analyzes how questions of substance were linked to the meeting format. In more detail, the essay asks which substantial questions were addressed within the OSCE's Corfu process, whether these issues were of strategic or subordinate importance, and what items will probably make it onto the summit agenda. Finally, it addresses the question of how the positions of the OSCE's main players – the US, the Russian Federation and the EU states – have been developing.

From Helsinki 2008 to Almaty 2010: The Corfu Process

Strictly speaking, the discussion process on the future of European security, which later became known as the 'Corfu Process', started at the 2008 Helsinki MC meeting. There, at a working lunch, ministers held discussions that 'concentrated on the future of security in Europe, including the recent initiatives presented by Russia and France' and agreed 'that the OSCE is the most suitable venue for these discussions'.³ The 'issue of a possible summit' was also addressed, but 'there seemed to be certain reluctance at this stage'. (Ibid).

The 2009 Greek Chairmanship took up and further developed this starting point and issued an invitation to an informal MC meeting in June 2009 on the Greek island of Corfu, the first meeting of this kind. In her concluding remarks, the Chairperson-in-Office, the Greek Foreign Minister Bakoyannis, stated that ministers 'agreed on the need for an open, sustained, wide-ranging and inclusive dialogue on security and concurred that the OSCE is a natural forum to anchor this dialogue'⁴ and tasked her 'Permanent Representative in Vienna to explore with all participating States ways for a more structured dialogue' (ibid.). During the months that followed, the Greek Chair organized a series of discussion meetings at ambassadorial level that covered the whole range of the OSCE's agenda from common norms and principles to arms control, transnational threats, conflict resolution, the human as well as the economic and environmental dimensions. At that stage, the Corfu Process was still an initiative by the Chairperson, although supported by an informal consensus among the States.

This changed at the 2009 Athens MC meeting, where ministers decided 'to continue the informal, regular and open dialogue, in the framework of the Corfu Process, through regular informal meetings, at the level of permanent representatives'⁵. The subjects of discussion were the same as in the first round of the

2 OSCE, Ministerial Council, Decision 3/10, Time and Venue of the Next OSCE Summit and Review Conference, MC.DEC/3/10, 3 August 2010. OSCE documents are available at the OSCE website (www.osce.org).

3 OSCE, Finland, Discussion on the future of security in Europe at the OSCE Ministerial working lunch on 4 December 2008, MC.DEL /92/08, 15 December 2008.

4 Corfu Informal Meeting of OSCE Foreign Ministers on the Future of European Security, Chair's Concluding Statement to the Press.

5 OSCE, Ministerial Council, Athens 2009, 2 December 2009, Decision No. 1/09, Furthering the Corfu Process, MC.DEC /1/09.

Corfu Process, from ‘[i]mplementation of all OSCE norms, principles and commitments’, ‘early warning, conflict prevention and resolution’, the ‘arms control and confidence- and security-building regime’, and ‘[t]ransnational and multidimensional threats and challenges’ to ‘[e]conomic and environmental challenges’, ‘[h]uman rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as democracy and the rule of law’, ‘[e]nhancing the OSCE’s effectiveness’, and ‘[i]nteraction with other organizations and institutions’ (ibid.). The issue of a summit was addressed as follows: ‘We note with interest its [Kazakhstan’s] proposal to hold an OSCE summit in 2010. We point out that such a high-level meeting would require adequate preparation in terms of substance and modalities.’⁶

The intention of the Western States was to initiate a discussion on the future of European security, and at the same time to create a political space where the proposal of the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev for a European Security Treaty could be discussed without committing Western States too early to certain results or a binding negotiating format. Therefore, the OSCE was an obvious choice as a discussion platform.

For a number of reasons, Russia has never felt particularly satisfied with the whole construction of the Corfu Process. There are some indications that Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov tried to torpedo it at the Athens MC meeting, obviously without success. The basic reason for Russia’s discomfort is that it is the OSCE that has been chosen as the arena for the discussion on the future of European security. This organization is characterized by its comprehensive security approach including the human dimension and its flexible and informal modus operandi, whereas the Russian Federation would prefer a more formal environment that deals with hard security issues only. From a Russian perspective, the choice of the OSCE also evokes bad memories of the 1990s, when the Security Model for Europe for the 21st Century was dealt with for over five years within the framework of this organization without achieving any tangible results. For Russia, this must raise the question of whether the Western States aim at the same treatment for the Medvedev proposal as in the case of the Security Model Exercise, as it was then called in diplomatic jargon. Seen through Russian eyes, the Corfu Process, although created as a political arena to discuss Russian concerns, has not much to offer to Russia; vice versa, Russia has not offered anything in the course of this process and has stuck to purely defensive positions. This is the background to why Russia has not been ready to table the Medvedev proposal within the Corfu Process.

When comparing the substance of the debate during the different periods, in the pre-Corfu phase the focus was still on the question of whether a discussion on the future of European security is needed at all. Between Corfu and Athens, the exchange was mainly on stocktaking, brainstorming and also on showing ‘red lines’; after Athens this was complemented by a flood of food-for-thought papers. However, this sequence suggests more progress than has actually been achieved. First, almost all issues addressed were of second or third-rate importance. The only issue of strategic relevance, which came up until the informal MC meeting in July 2010, was the question of the future of the conventional arms control regime in Europe; and this is an issue that does not belong to the core business of the OSCE although it is dealt with under its umbrella. Second, the discussion remained controversial. Although mutual understanding might have been improving, positions did not draw closer in any way. Russia took a thoroughly defensive stance on the large number of Western proposals that had been tabled. Finally and ironically, the key trigger for the whole discussion process, namely the Medvedev proposal for a European Security Treaty, has not been addressed.

⁶ OSCE, Ministerial Council, Athens 2009, 2 December 2009, Ministerial Declaration on the OSCE, Corfu Process: Reconfirm-Review-Reinvigorate Security and Co-operation from Vancouver to Vladivostok, MC.DOC /1/09.

All this indicates that the global reset of relations between the US and Russia does not yet fully parallel the European level. Although the debate has been opened, and although Russia's relations with a number of individual European States have improved remarkably,⁷ substantial progress still has to be achieved. In this respect, the Corfu Process up until now has resembled a warm-up phase still to be followed by the real game. The Astana Summit offers an opportunity to achieve a new quality.

The way to the summit decision

Kazakhstan has continuously urged the convening of a summit meeting in Astana in 2010. Originally, the Western reaction was negative. The formulation in the Ministerial Declaration quoted above that a summit 'would require adequate preparation in terms of substance' should be read to the effect that a summit was not seen as possible because of a lack of substance. This started to change in April 2010, when US President Barack Obama and Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev met at the margins of the Nuclear Security Summit. The joint statement on this meeting notes that the 'United States and Kazakhstan agreed to work on developing a substantive agenda for an OSCE Summit'.⁸ Although this did not represent a final US decision in favour of an OSCE summit, it meant that the US was ready to seriously consider the issue. Since late April 2010, the dominant view among Western OSCE delegations has been that there will be a summit. This shift of opinion was influenced by the positive assessment by Western governments of the role of the Kazakh Chair in the Kyrgyz crisis in April 2010. Later, in June 2010, although the atmosphere again worsened, the summit meeting as such was not questioned. There were discussions on its venue and, apart from Astana, other capitals such as Vienna and Madrid were considered, allegedly because they were easier to reach and temperatures were not as cold as in Astana. What sounded like a purely practical argument actually concealed a certain disappointment among Western States with certain domestic developments in Kazakhstan, particularly the Zhovtis case,⁹ and even more important, the decision of the Kazakhstani Parliament to grant lifelong immunity to the President and his family. The fact that, in the end, a decision was taken in favour of Astana can be read as a coincidence of US and Kazakhstani interests concerning a substantial increase in OSCE activities in Central Asia and on Afghanistan. As the Kazakhstani Foreign Minister Kanat Saudabayev put it on 20 July 2010 at the International Conference on Afghanistan in Kabul: 'Kazakhstan's strategic approach to the Afghan issue became one of the foundations of a historical consensus reached there on holding an OSCE Summit in Astana before the end of 2010'.¹⁰

7 The most relevant example is certainly the Polish-Russian relationship that had already started to improve before the Smolensk tragedy in April 2010 where the Polish President Lech Kaczynski and his large delegation died in an air crash on their way to commemorate the victims of Katyn. But also the agreement reached between Norway and the Russian Federation on the maritime delimitation in the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean, which put an end to a 40-year dispute, points to a possible renaissance of more co-operative approaches (cf. <http://www.regjeringen.no/en/ud/Whats-new/news>).

8 The White House, Joint Statement: Meeting of President Obama and Kazakhstan President Nazarbayev, 11 April 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/joint-statement-meeting-between-president-obama-and-kazakhstan-president-nazarbayev>.

9 In 2009 Yevgeny Zhovtis, a leading Kazakhstani human rights activist, was sentenced to four years in prison because of his role in a fatal road traffic accident. In Western countries, the length of this sentence has been generally seen as being influenced by political considerations. The case was also addressed in the Obama-Nazarbayev meeting in April 2010.

10 Statement by Kanat Saudabayev, Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE and Secretary of State and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, at the International Conference on Afghanistan, Kabul, 20 July 2010, at: http://www.osce.org/documents/cio/2010/07/45425_en.pdf <25 August 2010>.

Russia's position on the summit issue corresponded with its general view of the Corfu Process. Although it could not criticize the summit idea openly, because this was an initiative of a close ally, it could be sensed that the Russian Federation did not like this proposal at all. As a way out, Russia employed the same tactics as with the Corfu Process in general and downplayed the summit by calling it a jubilee summit — the 65th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, the 35th anniversary of the Helsinki Founding Act etc. — something Western States do not like at all. One consequence of this Russian position is that the summit can only take place in 2010, because Russia will provide its (lukewarm) support only for a close ally such as Kazakhstan and certainly not for the next OSCE Chairperson country, Lithuania.

Possible summit agenda items and interests of (groups of) key states

It has always been clear that a summit in 2010 will not sign important treaties or adopt other agreements, because there are none, and it would likely be impossible to develop them in the brief period until the summit. Instead, the summit has been conceptualized as a launching event that will adopt mandates and action plans, the working results of which will be decided upon at a follow-up summit meeting in two or three years. The following issues are most frequently discussed as agenda items for the Astana Summit: OSCE activities in Central Asia and on/in Afghanistan; arms control, particularly the modernization of the CFE Treaty; early warning, conflict prevention and resolution, especially in view of the protracted conflicts; strengthening existing and creating new tools for conflict management; and a comprehensive reconfirmation of existing OSCE commitments including the whole OSCE acquis in the human dimension.

OSCE activities in Central Asia and on/in Afghanistan

The need to react to the crisis in Kyrgyzstan and to prepare for the period after the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan has developed into the game changer in the debate on an OSCE summit in 2010 in Astana. Already since the beginning of 2010, 'the United States aimed at creating a role for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in resolving conflicts in Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan'.¹¹ In this context, the USA perceives Afghanistan and Central Asia as being in the same strategic context and thinks in terms of the 'Central Asia Six'. The Kazakhstani Chairmanship has consistently supported enhancing the OSCE's activities on Afghanistan. In April 2010, the Kazakhstani Chair contributed substantially to the resignation of the former Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev and brought him out of the country. And in the summer, the Chair backed the dispatch of an OSCE Police Advisory Group to Kyrgyzstan.¹² Both the USA and Kazakhstan have issued food-for-thought papers on possible OSCE contributions to stability in Afghanistan that list a large number of tasks from border security and management, combating transnational threats including counter-narcotics, energy security, water management and the whole range of human dimension tasks including electoral support. On 29 July 2010, the Permanent Council decided to send a small Election Support Team to the National Assembly elections in Afghanistan on 18 September 2010.¹³ Neither the US nor Kazakhstan explicitly rule out activities within Afghanistan. However, as Russia and a number of EU States strictly oppose OSCE activities on the territory of Afghanistan, such activities will most probably not occur.

11 M.K. Bhadrakumar, A Kosovo on the Central Asian Steppes, in: Asia Times online, 7 August 2010. The author is a retired Indian ambassador whose assignments included the Soviet Union, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Turkey.

12 OSCE, Permanent Council, Decision No. 947, OSCE Police Advisory Group to Kyrgyzstan, PC.DEC /947, 22 July 2010.

13 OSCE, Permanent Council, Decision No. 953, Election Support Team to Afghanistan, PC.DEC /953, 29 July 2010.

Enhanced OSCE activities in Central Asia and on Afghanistan confront the Russian Federation with a certain dilemma. On the one hand, Moscow is greatly interested in stability in the Central Asia Six region, and this is the reason why it has opened up logistical corridors for the coalition forces in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Russia has always stressed the role of the CSTO in Central Asia, a region that is perceived by Moscow to be an area of specific Russian interest. However, when it came to possible action and many in the West hoped that Russia ‘would do something’ in Kyrgyzstan, the Russian and CSTO reaction was more than reserved. Although it is completely understandable that the Russian government would stop at the unpredictable political and financial costs of a large-scale engagement in Kyrgyzstan, this opens up more political space for the activities of other international organizations such as the OSCE, in which Russia is a participating State with veto power, but is not the dominant actor. In addition, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), up until now, has also not played any role in the management of the Kyrgyz crisis. Obviously, the instruments it has developed so far — military manoeuvres with heavy weapons — do not fit with the scenarios experienced in Osh and Jalalabad. This leads to a situation in which the OSCE could develop into the organization with the largest room to manoeuvre in Kyrgyzstan and possibly beyond, an OSCE with a strong USA in a leading role. Whether this will be successful, and the USA and Russia will find a way to come to terms with one another, will be a strong indication of how advanced the ‘reset’ of their relations has already become.

The modernization of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE)

Although the CFE Treaty is not a direct part of the OSCE agenda, but is dealt with by its 30 States Parties plus those six new NATO member States that are not yet CFE Parties, the fate of this treaty will have a profound impact on the further development of the OSCE as an institution of cooperative security. CFE has always been dealt with under the umbrella of the OSCE. The signing of the Adapted CFE Treaty at the 1999 Istanbul Summit was one of the political highlights of this meeting. And this is all the more true for the current stage as all OSCE participating States with territory within the Treaty’s area of application will be entitled to become members. The other way round, a failure of the CFE regime, this cornerstone of cooperative security, would necessarily damage the OSCE which is equally built on the basis of a cooperative security approach.

After signing the New START Treaty, the US and the Russian Presidents agreed that their countries ‘are also committed to working with all our partners this year to strengthen the conventional arms control regime in Europe, and modernize it for the 21st century’.¹⁴ In mid-June 2010, the NATO countries presented a new conceptual framework for conventional arms control in Europe based on the three principles of reciprocal transparency, reciprocal limitations and restraint and host nation consent — that is the explicit agreement of a host state to the deployment of foreign armed forces on its territory. At a meeting of the CFE’s Joint Consultative Group at the end of July 2010, Russia had a positive reaction and declared its readiness to start new serious negotiations. The first stage of such talks will be negotiations on a new mandate for a ‘conventional arms control regime in Europe’. It would be very difficult if not impossible to conclude such a mandate by the Astana Summit. However, even substantial progress reached by Astana and declared there by the CFE States Parties would be an encouraging signal. In addition, one intervening factor, which has nothing to do with conventional arms control in Europe or with the OSCE, must be mentioned, namely the ratification of the New START Treaty by the US Senate and the US mid-term elections in November 2010. If the START Treaty has not been ratified by September 2010, it can be expected that the ratification procedure could only be started in 2011, possibly with a worsened ratio between Democrats and Republicans. And this again could

¹⁴ Joint Statement by the Presidents of the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Strategic Stability, 24 June 2010, at: <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2010/June/2010062451ihecuor0.1087719.html> <26 August 2010>.

possibly lead to greater problems in the ratification process. This would almost certainly delay progress in conventional arms control.

Resolution of protracted conflicts

Up until now, the OSCE has not been successful in resolving one of the three protracted conflicts where the organization is active. As the 2008 war in Georgia has shown, unresolved protracted conflicts can re-escalate into an open war. In Georgia in 2008, the OSCE (just as all other international organizations) not only had to observe rather helplessly how mutual provocations led to war, it also lost (together with the UN) its field mission in Georgia. Optimism has been repeatedly expressed on the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh at the 2008 Helsinki MC meeting and even by a Ministerial Statement welcoming ‘the constructive and positive momentum in the peace process for the political settlement of the Nagorno- Karabakh conflict’.¹⁵ However, such declarations have never been followed by real breakthroughs. And whether the joint efforts of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to speed up the resolution of the Transdnistria conflict, expressed at a meeting in Germany on 4/5 June 2010,¹⁶ will be successful, is yet to be seen. Thus, none of these conflicts will be resolved by the Astana Summit. However, it would be a step forward if the summit meeting could agree on a political initiative to resolve one of them. An even more visible signal would be if States could reach consensus on the re-establishment of an OSCE field presence in Georgia.

Strengthening existing and creating new tools for conflict management

Since the 2009 Athens MC meeting, numerous proposals have been made for strengthening existing and creating new tools for conflict management. Examples include enhancing the capacity of OSCE executive structures to collect and analyze early warning signals; requesting the Secretariat to provide enhanced support to the mediation and good offices efforts of the Chairmanship; authorizing the Chair, in case of crises, to deploy for a limited period small expert teams to assess the situation, report and liaise; and integrate track two efforts into the conflict resolution and post-conflict rehabilitation efforts of the OSCE. It would certainly be worth the effort if the Summit were to task the Secretariat with a report to the next MC meeting on how the OSCE could systematically increase its effectiveness in conflict prevention and resolution.

Reconfirmation of existing OSCE commitments

The reconfirmation of existing OSCE commitments is sometimes seen as a matter of course that can easily be achieved and is not particularly relevant. This is a gross misconception. Today, it would be impossible to reach consensus on many CSCE/ OSCE commitments that were adopted in the early 1990s, particularly, but not only in the human dimension. Therefore, reconfirming these commitments, not in a summary form, but pointing out explicitly the whole acquis including its most salient and advanced obligations such as the statement in the 1991 Moscow Document 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

15 Ministerial Statement (MC.DOC /1/08 of 5 December 2008), in: OSCE, Sixteenth Meeting of the Ministerial Council, Helsinki, 4 and 5 December 2008.

16 Memorandum (Treffen zwischen Bundeskanzlerin Angela Merkel und Präsident Dmitri Medwedew am 4. und 5. Juni 2010 in Meseberg), at: http://www.bundesregierung.de/nsc_true/Content/DE/_Anlagen/2010/2010-06-07-meseberg-memorandum-deutsch<30 August 2010>.


to the internal affairs of the State concerned',¹⁷ would be an important political achievement. Such a reconfirmation of commitments could be integrated into a document commemorating the 35th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, and the 20th anniversary of both the Charter of Paris and the Copenhagen Document.

The 2010 Astana Summit — a chance that must not be missed

The 2010 OSCE Summit is preceded by the NATO Summit (19/20 November) and the EU-US Summit (20 November), both taking place in Lisbon. All three events are interlinked. On the one hand, the OSCE summit must build on the latter two summits' achievements, on the other it is unique as it is the only event that will bring together all States within the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian space. The Summit represents a significant opportunity to re-establish a basic common understanding among all 56 participating States. At the same time, it constitutes a considerable risk should it fail. This risk of failure is higher than with the other two summit meetings, and a failure of the OSCE Summit would be more visible. However, a few criteria for success can already be identified.

Any success of the 2010 Astana Summit presupposes that a political substance can be reached that is qualitatively beyond everything we have experienced at any OSCE meeting since 1999 where the Organization largely contented itself with dealing with strategically subordinate niche issues. In more concrete terms, this means that a substantial political declaration must be achieved, which has been impossible at almost all MC meetings since 2000, plus sufficiently concrete mandates in the key areas. These include, at any rate, Central Asia/Afghanistan, arms control (CFE), protracted conflicts and a clear reconfirmation of OSCE commitments. This does not mean that all these issues can be resolved by or in Astana — the damage caused during one decade cannot be repaired in a few brief months. But it does mean that States would agree on a work plan (an EU proposal), which contains concrete mandates, and on a follow-on summit to assess progress. In more general terms, this would mean that States would repair and re-establish the foundations of cooperative behaviour in the OSCE area. For the OSCE as an organization this would mean a return to the realm of strategically relevant business. In sub-regional terms, Central Asia would become for the OSCE of the 2010s what the Balkans was in the 1990s: The key area of concern where the Organization acts as the or at least as one key player.

17 Document of the Moscow Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE, Moscow 1991.



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