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Is there still a place for cooperative security?

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Abstract

This article acknowledges that deterrence will likely be the dominant narrative and posture from both Russia and the West in the foreseeable future, but highlights the need for dialogue and cooperation to reduce risks and manage relations in an unstable security environment. It recalls how deterrence and détente were two pillars of security during the Cold War, and looks at how cooperative security can help to overcome the security dilemma currently faced by all sides. It also sketches out a possible process to discuss the future of European security.

Introduction

The OSCE is in crisis, paralysed by polarization, fallen off the political radar of main security stakeholders. There is little support or space for cooperative security. The main narrative and focus in the foreseeable future will be on deterrence, both from Russia and the West, particularly NATO countries. And yet, there could be a place for cooperative security, at least as part of managing relations between NATO and Russia, and in reducing the risk of the policy of deterrence deepening the security dilemma.

The forgotten pillar

European countries – wary of both Russia and the threat of Washington folding its security umbrella - are pouring billions of dollars into defence spending. The future of sovereign Ukraine depends on a credible deterrent. Russia continues to gear up its armed forces and war economy. Deterrence, deterrence, deterrence will no doubt be the mantra on both sides in the coming years.

Deterrence has long been a pillar of the security policies of NATO countries and Russia. However, in the past this was coupled with détente. After all, it was that spirit of détente that made it possible to launch the Helsinki Process in the early seventies and to finally agree on the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975.
It is worth recalling that détente was a central part of NATO doctrine. The Harmel report of 1967 says explicitly that "military security and a policy of détente are not contradictory but complementary"[1]. Collective security through NATO was vital, but, as the report pointed out, "the way to peace and stability in Europe rests in particular on the use of the Alliance constructively in the interest of détente".[2]

Times have changed. Russia still has to prove that it is again interested in peaceful coexistence with Ukraine. Moscow would argue that NATO enlargement undermines the idea of détente and the idea that European security is indivisible. Russia feels threatened by "Western expansion" and argues that "the West never tried to address security with Russia, only without it or against it"[3]. Meanwhile, the West argues that Moscow cannot be trusted, that its revisionist ambitions must be stopped, and that this requires strong defences and resolve, and enduring support for Ukraine. Deterrence is now the guiding principle on both sides. Russia, the West, and countries in-between are all caught in a security dilemma.

1 See « The Future Tasks of the Alliance » (Harmel report), NATO, 1967 , https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_26700.htm

2 Ibid.

3 See "the View from Moscow" in Back to Diplomacy, Final Report and Recommendations of the Panel of Eminent Persons on European Security as a Common Project p. 26,

The security dilemma is what happens when a state, in an effort to enhance its own security, is perceived as a threat by others. As a result, steps to enhance security by one state create greater instability within the wider security community. OSCE participating States tried to square this circle in the 1999 Istanbul document. On the one hand, OSCE heads of state or government reaffirmed "the inherent right of each and every participating State to be free to choose or change its security arrangements, including treaties of alliance, as they evolve".[4] At the same time, another sentence later in that same paragraph says that states "will not strengthen their security at the expense of the security of other States." This is designed to overcome the security dilemma. Furthermore, it says that "no State, group of States or organization can have any pre-eminent responsibility for maintaining peace and stability in the OSCE area or can consider any part of the OSCE area as its sphere of influence."[5] The past twenty years have shown what happens when this dilemma is not resolved.

While overcoming the security dilemma of both Russia and the West will be very difficult, it needs to be addressed, and the OSCE is the logical place to do it. Therefore, in addition to de-escalating the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, putting in place a durable ceasefire and fair political settlement, attention needs to be focused on how to rebuild some degree of stability in Europe, if not cooperation. There is no need to reinvent the wheel; the key is to dust off neglected tools and commitments.

Restraint and risk reduction

There is arguably less mil-to-mil dialogue today than during the Cold War, and yet the risks of incidents and accidents along an almost 5000-kilometre zone of contact between NATO and Russia are very high. Lack of mil-to-mil dialogue increases the risk of miscommunication and unpredictability, as well as rapid and dangerous escalation.[6] Since 2022, there have been several incidents between the militaries of Russia and NATO countries, and the chances of future frictions have increased with the large number of troops and weaponry in and around Ukraine, the positioning of Russian missiles in Belarus, as well as NATO enlargement to Sweden and Finland. Hybrid warfare can also heighten tensions and deepen suspicions, as seen by attacks on undersea cables, assassinations, cyber-attacks and sabotage.

The OSCE has a rich acquis of relevant documents to promote restraint, increase transparency, reduce risks and promote military contacts. These need to be revisited. In turn, more needs to be done to prevent and manage incidents and accidents in the air and at sea. It is telling that a last attempt to introduce OSCE guidelines on incident prevention and management on land, in the air and at sea was undertaken in the framework of the "Structured Dialogue", a process launched by the German OSCE Chairpersonship at the Hamburg Ministerial at the end of 2016. By the end of 2018 it became clear that major powers – both NATO and Russia – had no interest in a tangible outcome of the process.

The sides may also seek to send signals to break the cycle of escalation, test ideas, and telegraph certain policies such as restraint or explaining force posture. As a result, some degree of cooperation will be necessary, even if it is to make deterrence more credible. "Confidence building" is probably a misnomer in the current security environment; de-escalation or transparency-increasing measures might be more accurate.

4 OSCE Istanbul Document 1999.

5 Ibid.

6 Thomas Greminger, "Why deterrence needs dialogue and détente", GCSP Policy Brief no. 20, June 2025. https://www.gcsp.ch/sites/default/files/2025-06/GCSP-Policy-Brief-20%20digital.pdf

Whatever they are called, they are urgently needed. The alternative is a highly volatile situation between two heavily armed and nervous camps where any misstep or misread signal could trigger a rapid escalation even worse than the current war in Ukraine.

Such steps could open the way for discussing bigger issues of mutual interest such as strategic stability and arms control. Discussions will also need to be held on the impact of technology on warfare, including the use of drones, cyber-attacks, and hybrid warfare. Progress in these areas could open the possibility for dialogue between the United States and Russia on other issues of common interest including deconfliction in Syria, security in the Arctic and the Middle East, cooperation in outer space, and sharing intelligence related to terrorism.

Process design

If the political will is there, the challenge is to design an inclusive process to discuss the future of European security. Precedents include the open-ended series of dialogues on the future of European security launched in 1972 that resulted in the signing of the Helsinki Final Act more than two years later, the follow-up to the 1990 Charter of Paris that led to substantive decisions at the 1992 Helsinki Summit, or preparations for OSCE Summits, such as in Istanbul in 1999 or Astana in 2010. Agreement on almost anything will be difficult. But informal dialogue can at least start sketching the contours of possible issues to be discussed, and get participating States used to using the frameworks that have become rusty as a result of COVID and the war in Ukraine.

Finland could launch the process in the 'Golden Jubilee' year of the Helsinki Final Act. Switzerland, which will chair the OSCE in 2026, could be a motor for driving forward a more cooperative agenda. The 'Structured Dialogue', chaired by Norway, could be revived while Austria, as host country of the OSCE – and host of the Ministerial Council meeting in late 2025 – could be a catalyst for cooperation. There is no illusion that the political space for these kinds of initiatives will be defined by the evolution of attempts to end hostilities and move towards a political settlement in Ukraine. Still, there needs to be a political will to exploit the space available.

Ideas can be drawn from Track 2 initiatives, such as the one carried out by Geneva Center for Security Policy (GCSP) and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung that resulted in the production of "peace matrix"[7]. The dialogue, carried out over more than two years, brought together experts from Europe, the United States, Ukraine and Russia. The peace matrix shows how security and cooperation will have to be fostered on at least three levels: between the United States and Russia; Europe and Russia; and Ukraine and Russia. It also outlines four thematic areas to be addressed: de-escalation mechanisms; sovereignty of Ukraine; European security order; and global ecosystem. All of the potential steps that need to be taken cannot be taken at once. Rather, the tool is designed to help policymakers set priorities and initiate political consultations on how to rebuild cooperation and foster security in Europe. Both the process and outcomes should be as cooperative as possible.

7 Christos Katsioulis, Walter Kemp and Simon Weiß (February 2025, updated April 2025), "Conversations on European Security Peace Matrix", https://peace.fes.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Projects/Conversations-on-European-Security_V2.pdf

What are the alternatives?

It is worth underlining that cooperative security is not a competitor to collective security, rather it is a compliment. For example, NATO countries that are part of the OSCE can coordinate their military strategies within the Alliance. At the same time, they can use the OSCE to talk to a wider group of countries across a more comprehensive range of security issues. Furthermore, judging by the current position of the US administration (among others), NATO enlargement in the next few years looks unlikely. Therefore, the OSCE remains an attractive place for countries that want a seat at the table in conversations that affect their national security and the security of Europe.

It is also worth keeping in mind that collective security organizations cannot be taken for granted in the current unpredictable geopolitical environment. Recent criticisms of NATO and the United Nations (not only from Washington) suggest that keeping open a variety of options would be prudent for countries with a stake in security and cooperation Europe.

Those who dismiss the need for cooperative security should outline the alternatives. Obviously, deterrence is one, indeed the most likely. But what could be the consequences of a deterrence-only policy? Years of an armed stand-off between Russia and the West at enormous political and economic cost? If there are to be discussions, at some point, on the future of European security, one would hope that Europeans, and not just Moscow and Washington, would be part of that conversation. As Finnish President Alexander Stubb warned at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025, we are facing a Yalta versus Helsinki moment: either a carve-up of Europe between the big powers, or a clear settling of how countries should behave towards each other based on commonly agreed principles. The latter conversations are not likely to happen in a revived NATO-Russia or in an EU-Russia forum, nor at the UN. By default, if not design, the last resort is the OSCE.

In December 2010 at the Astana Summit leaders of all 57 OSCE participating States recommitted themselves to the vision of a “free, democratic, common and indivisible Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security community stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok, rooted in agreed principles, shared commitments and common goals”. That vision has now become a grand illusion. The OSCE has become a conflict zone rather than a security community.

Ending the war in Ukraine and reducing tensions between Russia and the West will require imagination, leadership and political commitment at the level that we have not witnessed since 1990, 1975 or 1945. And the future of European security will require a degree of cooperation, not only deterrence. The anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act is a golden opportunity to reaffirm basic principles, to recall the usefulness of cooperative security, set down guardrails to manage relations between states, and to begin a process of rebuilding some degree of trust among countries with an interest in the future of European security.

Conclusion

To conclude, there is still a space for cooperative security. It is a small space, but one which needs to be used and stretched to the full, in the short-term in order to keep open channels of communication, reduce and manage risks, establish and stay within common guardrails, and, in the medium-to-long-term to work together towards a more peaceful and stable European security order.

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