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# Russia, The United States, and the OSCE: A Cloudy Future?

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## Abstract

This article analyzes the role of the OSCE in U.S.-Russia relations from the 1970s to the present, and discusses how the OSCE might regain relevance and importance for European security in the future. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 capped almost two decades of deteriorating relations between Washington and Moscow and increasing discord and paralysis in the OSCE. The Helsinki Final Act and subsequent CSCE agreements were reached because both American and Soviet leaders pursued important goals that could be achieved best in a pan-European multilateral negotiation. After the end of the Cold War, the CSCE flourished during the 1990s, transforming into the OSCE. However, by the late 2000s U.S. and Russian views on the proper role of the OSCE diverged markedly, part of a growing disagreement over Europe's security architecture. While OSCE institutions remain in place, since 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and began its war against Ukraine, there has been almost no consensus among the participating states. The article argues that, for the OSCE to have a future, its participating states must once again address important political and security issues there. With its existing institutions and universal membership, the OSCE could be a venue for negotiating important elements of a new political-security order in Europe. But for this to happen, participating states – especially the U.S. and Russia – must choose to do so.

## Introduction

On August 1, 2025 the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, more commonly known as the OSCE, celebrates fifty years from the signing in Helsinki, Finland of the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). The 1975 Helsinki Summit was attended by thirty-five European and North American heads of state or government, and was arguably the high point of East-West détente during the Cold War. The Final Act was the initial product of what became an ongoing process of multilateral negotiations on European security, the CSCE, and subsequently an international organization, the OSCE. The CSCE/OSCE played a crucial role in ending the Cold War and constructing the post-Cold War political-security order in Europe.

While all European states, along with the U.S. and Canada, were invited to participate in the CSCE, the Final Act and the "Helsinki process" that followed were in large part an initiative of the Soviet Union and the United States, aimed at improving and managing relations between the two superpowers. The Final Act was, in essence, a belated peace treaty ratifying European borders at the end of World War II; where the CSCE provided a framework for political and conventional arms control negotiations that ended the Cold War. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the new OSCE became a key forum for US-Russian consultation, agreement on norms, and operational cooperation. Despite this record of achievement, not just the usefulness but the continued existence of the OSCE is currently widely questioned.

## An Uneasy Anniversary

Over the past two decades, the OSCE has fallen upon hard times, as US-Russia relations have steadily deteriorated. In his infamous 2007 Munich speech Putin blasted the OSCE as biased, overly concerned with human rights and elections in Russia and its neighbors, and a de facto vehicle for American geopolitical ambition. Although Moscow continued to participate, it increasingly denounced the OSCE for its alleged failure to reflect Russian priorities and concerns. The 2013 Maidan protests in Ukraine, Russia's seizure of Crimea, and the war in Donbas blazed a firebreak in Russia's relations with the OSCE and the West in general.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 brought these relations to their lowest point since the depths of the Cold War.

As the OSCE/CSCE turns fifty, the very future of the Organization is in question, let alone whether it can help ameliorate and manage East-West relations. Given increasing Russian criticism and obstructionism since Putin's 2007 speech, the question naturally arises whether Moscow has any serious interest in the survival of the organization, let alone constructive participation in it. Meanwhile, in the U.S. the Trump administration has so far vacillated between indifferent skepticism and outright hostility toward international organizations and multilateral institutions. Russia's full-scale invasion and ongoing war against Ukraine contradict the very essence of the OSCE as a norms-based institution. There is little indication that either Moscow or Washington at this time consider the OSCE or its basic principles an effective guide for reaching and implementing a settlement of the war.

There are also structural obstacles to a significant future role for the OSCE in European security. The Cold War CSCE was divided into three camps: NATO (led by the U.S.), the Warsaw Pact (led by the USSR), and the Neutral and Non-Aligned (NNA) countries in which Sweden, Switzerland, and Yugoslavia were among the most active participants. NATO and the EU expanded following the collapse of the Soviet Union while the Warsaw Pact dissolved and the NNA as a bloc disappeared. Economic and security issues that were once substantively debated between the three major blocs in the CSCE are now often decided in the EU or NATO caucuses. The remaining participating states, among them the Russian Federation, are then presented with what often seem faits accomplis.

As such, the question remains: does the present-day OSCE have anything going for it beyond an illustrious history, and can it still play a constructive role in moderating or improving relations between the two largest participating states – the United States and the Russian Federation? The short answer is: it depends. A more nuanced reply points to the need first of all for a real desire on the part of the leaders of both states to bring relations out of the current deep freeze. If Moscow persists in pursuing expansive war aims in Ukraine, or if Washington and Allies preclude doing any business with Russia while the war continues, then the OSCE is likely at best to remain on life support.

Nonetheless, there are good reasons why the OSCE can and should survive and serve as a forum for resolving differences between the U.S. and Russia, particularly those on issues that affect all the states in the OSCE area. The OSCE is the only European security body that includes all the of the countries of the region and the two largest North American states. It has a well-established set of venues for comprehensive political and security dialogues. There are no institutional limits on the subjects that can be negotiated under the OSCE umbrella; the only restrictions are those imposed by the participating states themselves.

## From Polemics to Consensus – and Back

History can serve as a guide to how the OSCE might be useful today. The CSCE/OSCE came into being because both the Soviet Union and the United States had vital interests in Europe which they came to believe could be ensured only through dialogue and agreement with the other.

Agreements on these issues could be reached and implemented only with the buy-in of other European states – hence the universal membership.[1] The Soviet Union set a high priority on gaining formal western recognition of the state borders established in Europe at the end of World War II. The U.S. desired to relax political tensions, reduce obstacles to contacts and communication, and promote civic and political rights and fundamental freedoms, especially in the states in the Soviet bloc. Both sides wished to lower the level of conventional military confrontation in Europe and reduce fears of surprise attack. The result – the Final Act – was a package deal that included much, but not all of what Moscow and Washington wanted.

The Final Act contained a provision for follow-up, as both the USSR and the U.S. desired to manage the relationship and pursue through negotiation those aims which had not been achieved at the 1975 Helsinki Summit. The first decade of the Helsinki process was rocky, marked by sharp disagreements, in particular over western criticism of human rights abuses in the Soviet bloc, and interrupted for an extended period after the declaration of martial law in Poland in December 1981. Progress, if any, was grudging and incremental.

Things changed after Gorbachev came to power in 1985. In the 1986 Stockholm Conference on Disarmament in Europe (CDE), Soviet representatives for the first time accepted the principle of on-site inspection.[2] This satisfied a longstanding U.S. demand and enabled rapid negotiation of a string of major arms control agreements, including the 1990 Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) reached by twenty-three participating states "within the context" of the CSCE. The Charter of Paris, signed at the same summit as the Conventional Armed Force in Europe (CFE) Treaty, formalized the end of the Cold War and the forty-year division of Europe.

The Paris Charter contained far-reaching, unequivocal commitments to basic principles of security, individual rights, fundamental freedoms, rule of law, and democracy. The document also established institutions which in four years transformed the CSCE into an organization, the OSCE. The 1990s were a decade of remarkable cooperation between the U.S. and Russia (as the formal successor to the Soviet Union). The OSCE engaged in conflict prevention, conflict mediation and resolution, and post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation, in large part through a set of nearly twenty field missions in at least seventeen different participating states. Discussions in the OSCE's Vienna headquarters led to the 1999 Adapted CFE Treaty and the Charter for European Security, which aimed to provide a comprehensive framework for management of cooperative security in Europe.

However, this elaborate framework was never really put to use. While Russia sought to make the OSCE the major venue for managing European security, the U.S. and its chief European allies expanded both the EU and NATO.[3] While the architects of these policies in Washington and Brussels did not necessarily intend to sideline the OSCE and diminish Russia's role, in the end that is what happened. NATO's attack on Milosevic's

1 Only Enver Hoxha's Albania declined the invitation to the original CSCE; Albania later joined in 1990. The participation of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) under President Slobodan Milosevic was suspended in 1992, but was restored after Milosevic's removal.

2 See the interview of Ambassador Robert L. Barry on the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs History Project website, www.adst.org; also former Prime Minister Yevgeniy Primakov to author, June, 2000; also Oleg Grinevsky and Lynn M. Hansen, Making Peace: Confidence and Security in a New Europe (New York, 2009).

3 Gorbachev raised the prospect of the CSCE as the primary security forum in Europe during the December 1991 summit with George H.W. Bush in Malta. This idea was also a major Russian objective at the 1994 Budapest summit. For these and other examples, see William H. Hill, No Place for Russia: European Security Institutions since 1989 (New York, 2018) especially p. 100, pp.154-155, and p. 417, note 120.

Yugoslavia, immediately after its first expansion, hardened Russian suspicions. Despite many positive moves and developments after 2000, Moscow increasingly perceived western actions in the OSCE as aimed at criticizing or weakening Russia. Putin's 2007 diatribe in Munich reflected widespread sentiment in Russian political and intellectual elites that the U.S., NATO, and the EU aimed to push Russia out of what it saw as its European space, and perhaps even to effect regime change in Russia.

Dialogue between Moscow and Washington, both within and outside the OSCE, deteriorated steadily after the 2010 Astana Summit, and especially after Putin's 2012 return to the presidency. The U.S. used the Permanent Council and OSCE Ministerial meeting largely to criticize Russia, especially for its actions in Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, and elsewhere on the former Soviet periphery. The Vienna Document (VDOC), the most fundamental military security agreement in the OSCE acquis, has not been updated since 2011. U.S-Russia cooperation within the Minsk Group, a welcome exception to the norm, effectively ended with Azerbaijan's victory in the war against Armenia in 2020. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, dialogue in the Permanent Council in Vienna has been little more than vituperative accusations and denunciations.

## From the Old Order to the New

Notwithstanding the deep divisions among them, all of the participating states remain in the OSCE and in Vienna. The Organization is still there and does not need to be recreated. What needs to be created is a desire on the part of Russia, the U.S., Ukraine, and the other participating states to begin and participate in a dialogue on how to provide for security and stability in Europe after the war in Ukraine is ended. It is mostly up to Moscow and Kyiv to determine what terms will enable them to stop fighting. However, all of the OSCE participating states have an interest in how the peace in Europe can be maintained after the conflict.

Agreements between Russia, the United States, and Europe, in addition to whatever Ukraine and Russia decide, will be needed for a stable peace. Even if a settlement limits weapons and deployments inside Ukraine, there are a host of broader regional military and security issues that need to be resolved. Since the 1999 ACFE and 2011 VDOC were adopted, there have been tremendous advances in conventional weaponry, such as longer-range rocket artillery, improved combat aircraft, and autonomous aerial and naval surveillance and attack vehicles. Drones and cyber can be used for sabotage as well as kinetic operations. The end of the INF Treaty, combined with development of increasingly accurate ballistic missiles of all ranges, has brought back to Europe an old threat in much more sophisticated form.

These issues need to be discussed by Russia, the U.S., NATO, and other participating states, since at least some of these capabilities can be developed, produced, and deployed by many smaller states, not just major powers. These discussions at some point will need to address possible parameters for locations and size of Russian and western military deployments, and how transparency might be ensured and confidence built against the fear of surprise attack. In providing for future military security and stability, the states of Europe and North America face a choice of what will follow the war in Ukraine. They can continue to produce more weapons, develop new ones, conscript more troops, and deploy them continuously to counter existing, emerging, and future threats. Such a course is likely at best to produce an ongoing security dilemma between Russia on the one hand and the U.S. and its allies on the other, or at worst an accident and a major war. Or the leaders of these states can chart a course similar to that of their predecessors in the early 1970s.

The states of Europe and North America, the U.S. and Russia are not back in the same place they were in 1973, when the CSCE negotiations began in Geneva. Borders have been re-drawn, new states emerged, political allegiances shifted, and scientific and technical advances have made weapons of war far more formidable. Fifty years of history, not all of it peaceful or pleasant, has created new fears, suspicions, and resentments. Nonetheless, for a historian and former participant in the Cold War Helsinki process, the fundamental issues and choices seem very familiar. Will we pursue the chimera of impregnable military superiority, or will we seek to reduce the level of confrontation, increase confidence, and thus reduce the fear of surprise? Will we seek areas of pragmatic common agreement even with those with whom we differ vehemently over norms of political, social, and economic organization? And can we be confident those interlocutors with whom we so deeply disagree will act the same with us?

Ultimately leaders in Moscow, Washington, and other European capitals need to decide which is the greater threat: continue on the present course with the war in Ukraine, in which each side hopes that the other side and its supporters will collapse first, while risking expansion of the conflict; OR engage in negotiations that involve significant concessions to the other side, with the risk this will be perceived by the other party or other states as a reward and encourage further instances of similar behavior.

Guidelines and certainties from the past few decades are of limited use in making this choice. The post-Cold War order, indeed the post-World War II European order is over, and the basic outlines and rules of the new order need to be agreed. Russia, the U.S., their Allies and partners can start negotiating the terms of this new order now, or they can let the fighting go on in the hope of getting a better deal at some uncertain future date.

## What Can Be Done?

There is much that can be done in the OSCE to address the US-Russia relationship and how it affects broader European security. For that to happen, the fighting in Ukraine has to stop, and it is not at all clear how soon that might happen. As the party that initiated the conflict, Russia is far from achieving its initial objectives. At the same time, Ukraine has lost too much territory, blood, and treasure to easily accept an agreement that simply freezes things where they are. Pressure from the Trump administration has forced Moscow and Kyiv to begin talks, but it is uncertain whether it will have the necessary staying power. Strong support for Ukraine from Europe may make it easier for Ukraine to get an acceptable end to the fighting, but then harder to work out longer-term security arrangements with Russia.

Should the war in Ukraine come to some sort of end, and the participating states choose to use the OSCE as a venue to discuss a new security order, there will be some major differences from the initial 1973 negotiations in Geneva. Unlike 1973, the OSCE already has fifty years' worth of agreed principles and norms. Yet the second largest participating state is in clear, blatant violation of the most basic of those principles. At the same time, Foreign Minister Lavrov uses the principle of equal security to berate the West for its support of Ukraine and NATO expansion.

For any practical horse-trading in the OSCE to work, the participating states will need to acknowledge their deep divisions over principles and not allow these differences to block discussions and agreements on other subjects. In this sense, almost any real negotiations that occur in the OSCE today will resemble those in the Helsinki process between 1973 and 1989, which were marked by vituperative polemics, frequent disruptions,

and slow, episodic progress. Criticism for alleged violations must still be allowed and accepted, but should not be an insuperable impediment to a search for areas of agreement. Participating states will need to accept the new reality. Normative commitments and institutions of the OSCE will remain, but there will also be greater discord over failure to observe norms, and less operational activity in these institutions. If any of this is a deal-breaker, especially for the U.S. or Russia, the OSCE will remain sidelined.

Military security negotiations should take precedence. There is a dire need to restore some semblance of transparency, information exchange, confidence building, and risk reduction, in particular along the long border between Russia and NATO. Although Russia may reasonably expect that its legitimate military security concerns will be addressed, it should not and cannot exclude discussion of subjects it does not like, which include a broad spectrum in the human dimension.

The negotiation of the original CFE Treaty can serve as a rough model for Russia-US and Russia-NATO conventional arms and security negotiations. The original CFE talks included only the twenty-three members of the Warsaw Pact and NATO, but were conducted under the overall aegis of the CSCE, with periodic reports to the other participating states. The rationale was that the results concerned all the European states, even if they were not directly involved, and some of the norms agreed might be more broadly applicable. This approach was continued with the Adapted CFE Treaty.

The OSCE can be rejuvenated if the participating states agree to use it as a venue to seek meaningful agreements on important subjects. While the initial priority should be on updates to agreements and norms for conventional military security, eventually the participating states will need to face the far more vexing political questions raised by Russia's war against Ukraine: are there circumstances in which the forcible change of state borders is acceptable?; is this just a violation of the Helsinki decalogue that we choose to ignore?; and, if so, are there other principles whose observance is optional?

There is no point in the fifty-year history of the OSCE at which observance of OSCE norms, including the ten principles of the Final Act, has been perfect. Even the broad consensus of 1990, which produced the Paris Charter, was not as broad, deep, or lasting as many of the participants at the time hoped. OSCE commitments and norms have always been ideals and aspirations, not realities.

In the end, for the OSCE to survive and serve to moderate US and European relations with Russia, it must not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. The 1990 Paris and 1999 Istanbul summits were high points, but not the end of history. OSCE achievements include helping end the Cold War and ensuring over forty years without major war in Europe. Russia's current war in Ukraine is a failure, but also not the end of history. A pan-European forum will almost certainly be needed to help provide for the next forty years of peace. Why not a revitalized OSCE?

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