Ending Up Somewhere Else: The Need for Strategy in the OSCE

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Abstract

This paper examines past attempts to develop a strategy within the OSCE, their limited success, and their impact on the Organization. It also looks at how the war in Ukraine and tensions between Russia and the West have triggered a strategic rethink of security in Europe and what implications this could have for the Organization. The paper concludes that while it has been difficult for the OSCE to develop a strategy by design, it may have to develop a strategy by necessity—both to save itself and to restore peace and security in Europe.

Introduction

Strategy "bridges the gap from a less-desirable current state of affairs […] to a more desirable future state of affairs."[2] Since its inception in 1975, the OSCE/CSCE has been all about moving Europe from a less desirable state of affairs to a more co-operative form of security. Generally speaking, a strategy identifies desired ends and figures out the ways, means, and capabilities that are needed to achieve the desired outcome. A strategy should also factor in the costs and risks

of executing it. Within the OSCE there has not really been a strategy to guide the Organization towards achieving its goal of greater co-operative security.

When the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) was created in the early 1970s, there was a clear objective. As declared in the Helsinki Final Act, states participating in the CSCE wanted to promote better relations among themselves and ensure conditions in which their people could live in peace.[3] For the Communist bloc, the CSCE was a way of entrenching the status quo. For the West and Helsinki Committees (particularly in Eastern Europe) that were inspired by the human rights aspects of the Final Act, the CSCE was a way of promoting greater openness

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behind the Iron Curtain, and even prying it open. Therefore, both sides—and neutral and non-aligned countries in between—had strategic interests in keeping the CSCE process going. The goal was to promote security through co-operation.

It worked. The CSCE contributed to managing East-West relations during the Cold War. Indeed, one could say that by 1989/90 the CSCE had achieved its goal. At the time, there was briefly talk that the CSCE could be the basis of a new common European home. While this did not win the support that President Gorbachev had hoped for, the Charter of Paris for a New Europe that was agreed on November 21, 1990, outlined a vision for a more united Europe and provided guidelines for the realization of a community of free and democratic states from Vancouver to Vladivostok. There was also a common understanding that reaching the lofty objectives of the Charter would "require a new quality of political dialogue and co-operation" and thus development of the structures of the CSCE.[4] Meetings became more regular and institutions were created, including a Secretariat, a Conflict Prevention Centre, an Office for Free Elections, and a Parliamentary Assembly. In short, there was a plan, and the CSCE was given the means (resources and capabilities) to achieve the desired ends.

However, the hope for a peaceful new era was dashed with conflicts in some parts of the former Soviet Union, including in Georgia and Moldova, and between Armenia and Azerbaijan. A new strategy was therefore needed to manage the challenges of change, and the

CSCE needed new capabilities. These were developed creatively and quickly by appointing a High Commissioner on National Minorities, deploying field missions and creating permanent decision-making and governing bodies, establishing the post of Chairperson-in-Office, and strengthening early warning, conflict prevention, and crisis management capacities. The transformation from Conference to Organization was acknowledged with the change of name from CSCE to OSCE at the Budapest Summit of 1994.

However, by the time of the Budapest Summit, it was becoming evident that for some countries the priority was NATO and EU enlargement rather than making the OSCE the preeminent forum for dealing with European security. This led to increased tensions between Russia and the West which made it more difficult to co-operate. This worsening of relations made it all the more important to develop ways of enhancing common security but all the more difficult to agree on a common strategy.

This paper looks at attempts made to develop a strategy within the OSCE, focusing in particular on the Strategic Policy Support Unit (SPSU). The paper also explores the reasons why the OSCE has consistently failed to adopt a longer-term strategy, in contrast to other international organizations. It concludes with recommendations on how to develop a co-operative security agenda that would revive the OSCE and contribute to rebuilding the European security architecture.

Dialogue without strategy

One of the many quotations attributed to the American baseball player Yogi Berra is that "if you don't know where you are going, you will end up somewhere else." This certainly applies to the OSCE.

Since the mid-1990s there have been some successes in adopting strategies to address new global challenges, including the changing nature of security threats, terrorism, organized crime, violent extremism, hate crimes, and intra-state conflict. At the 1999 Istanbul Summit an effort was made to improve the security environment by adopting a Charter for European Security and an Agreement on Adaptation of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe. At the Ministerial Council in Maastricht in December 2003, participating States adopted an OSCE Strategy to Address Threats to Security and Stability in the Twenty-First Century and the OSCE Strategy Document for the Economic and Environmental Dimension. However, in the following years there was no attempt to look at how the OSCE's goals, mandates, and capacities could be applied systematically to deal with the challenges identified in those strategies.

While it had been possible to reach consensus on the strategic context, it was becoming more difficult to find common ground on how to deal with rapidly unfolding events. Color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, the war in Iraq, NATO enlargement, and the rise of a more assertive Russia under President Putin further strained relations between Russia and the West. In his speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Putin criticized double standards, a breakdown of international law, NATO "expansion," and the dangers of a unipolar world. He also warned that some "people are trying to transform the OSCE into a vulgar instrument designed to promote the foreign policy interests of one or a group of countries."[5]

In the aftermath of the war in Georgia in 2008 there had been efforts to improve security and co-operation, including the "Corfu Process," designed to rebuild trust between states and take forward dialogue on Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security.[6] There was also the "Towards a Security Community" declaration at the OSCE Summit in Astana in December 2010, which outlined the "vision of a free, democratic, common and indivisible Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security community."[7] Unfortunately, the plan of action that was supposed to set benchmarks to achieve this vision was not adopted due to a lack of consensus and disagreements over ongoing conflicts in the OSCE area.

To provide some sense of direction, a decision was taken under Ireland's Chairpersonship in 2012 to take "a coordinated strategic approach" to reach the vision of Astana through the so-called "Helsinki +40 process."[8] This turned into more of an internal process of reforming the OSCE than a way of improving relations between Russia and the West. The process was eventually derailed with the annexation of Crimea and fighting in Luhansk and Donetsk in 2014.

Under Germany's Chairpersonship of the OSCE in 2016, a decision was taken at the Hamburg Ministerial Council

to launch a "structured dialogue on the current and future challenges and risks to security in the OSCE area to foster a greater understanding on these issues that could serve as a common solid basis for a way forward."[9] This led to the establishment of the Structured Dialogue. However, there was no strategy behind how this process should be conducted, its chair changed almost every year, and there was insufficient political will from key states. As a result, five years of deliberations produced few results.

The need for a more strategic approach

When Thomas Greminger became Secretary General in 2017, he perceived the need for a more strategic approach. Having been Switzerland's ambassador to the OSCE during that country's Chairpersonship in 2014, he was all too aware of the gridlock within official OSCE dialogue formats and the need for fresh thinking. He was also concerned about the lack of interest among countries in chairing the Organization. He therefore wanted to strengthen the Secretariat's capacity to think strategically and to support the Chair.[10] To that end he decided to create a strategic policy planning cell. This was in line with his mandate to support the Chair "in all activities aimed at fulfilling the goals of the OSCE by, *inter alia*, providing expert advisory, material, technical and other support which may include background information, analysis, draft decisions, draft statements, summary records and archival support."[11]

Because of budgetary constraints and sensing that the idea might not enjoy support among all participating States at the outset, the Secretary General launched the unit as an extra-budgetary project. After a recruitment process, experts were hired by secondment from the Russian Federation, the United States, Finland, and later Switzerland.[12]

The Unit—soon renamed the Strategic Policy Support Unit (SPSU)—provided support to Chairpersonships (incoming and in office), gave strategic advice to the Secretary General, helped to co-ordinate the preparation of the program outline for the budget, and worked with relevant sections in the Secretariat to devise more strategic approaches to the Organization's programmatic activities (such as in Central Asia) and with Mediterranean partners. Much of the advice provided by the SPSU was oral or informal. One of the Unit's main impacts was to stimulate more strategic thinking within the Secretariat and Chairpersonships. The Unit also helped promote informal spaces for dialogue, such as the "Perspectives 20-30" agenda (focusing on youth), Security Days, Talking Points (speakers series), and the Cooperative Security Initiative. Furthermore, it carried out research including the production of a report (unpublished) entitled *Leadership, Continuity and Creativity: Towards a More Attractive Chairmanship Model*, which was discussed by representatives of previous and incoming Chairpersonships, and an internal paper on China and the OSCE.

At a time when resources were tight and trust in international organizations was low, the Unit tried to work with

OSCE executive structures to focus on areas where the OSCE could make a difference, to accentuate its added value, and to increase impact. A recurrent question in planning meetings was: "What can states do together in the OSCE that they cannot do alone or somewhere else?" Another question was "how to do less and do it better," instead of the usual mantra of "doing more with less" (because of zero nominal growth).

From the outset, the Unit was viewed with skepticism by some sections of the Secretariat and some OSCE delegations. Concerns were expressed about how the Unit was established: Some participating States felt that the idea could have been explained better to them and should have been agreed to by consensus. Others questioned whether and why the Secretary General should have a role in developing strategy for the Organization. Some argued that this is the prerogative of participating States. Others felt that the OSCE does not need a strategy, especially when dealing with the daily realities of the crisis in Ukraine. But as Lawrence Freedman has pointed out, "strategy comes into play where there is actual or potential conflict, when interests collide and forms of resolution are required."[13] It is precisely in times of crisis that one needs a strategy.

Slovak Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajcak, as OSCE Chair in 2019, understood this need. He tried to promote dialogue among ambassadors in Vienna and invited OSCE foreign ministers for an informal meeting in the High Tatras. He sought to promote common ground, consensus, and co-operation. While ministers were constructive during the meeting, this spirit was not reflected in the Permanent Council, and it did not translate into decisions at the Ministerial meeting in Bratislava in December 2019. With apparent frustration, Lajcak concluded the Slovak Chairpersonship with the unusual move of issuing a statement blasting the lack of consensus and concluding that "for me the only way to harness the potential of the Organization […] is through political engagement, and political vision."[14]

Thomas Greminger took a similar approach, calling for a "common unifying agenda." Critics attacked him for allegedly trying to seek common ground at the expense of common principles and whispered that he was too close to Moscow, not least since some Russian diplomats had previously used the expression "unifying agenda." It was not even possible to get participating States to agree on a multi-year (or even two-year) program outline that would have enabled a more strategic approach to matching political priorities with resources. As a result, the critics and cynics prevailed: the Organization was crippled by competing, divisive, and often petty, even personal, agendas rather than a common, unifying one.

With participating States unwilling or unable to take a longer-term perspective, the Secretary General—in consultation with the Troika—supported the launch of a Cooperative Security Initiative. This project—carried out in co-operation with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and GLOBSEC—brought together eighteen experts from the OSCE area to stimulate people to think about why and how

states need to work together for security and to deal with modern threats and challenges. This resulted in a report entitled *Restoring European Security* as well as a number of online products designed to provoke fresh thinking on "principled cooperation."[15] As the experts warned, "it must not take a major war to restore or build a new European security system."[16] The hope was that this Track II initiative could help set an agenda for co-operation that participating States would take up. This didn't happen, particularly because of the COVID-19 pandemic but also because there was no appetite among participating States to look for ways to de-escalate tensions or identify possible areas of co-operation for the future.

A strategy: Everybody's got one

There seems to be an aversion among the OSCE community to thinking strategically. Yet almost every national administration, company, and regional or international organization has a strategic policy or policy planning unit. It is standard practice. Almost every intergovernmental organization produces strategies. The EU has a number of strategic plans and launched a Strategic Compass early in 2022. NATO issued a new strategic concept in 2022 at the Madrid Summit "to equip the Alliance for security challenges and guide its future political and military development."[17] Regional organizations in other parts of the world are capable of long-term thinking; the African Union has its Agenda 2063, which is a 50-year plan adopted in 2013. The United Na-

tions—which has three times more members than the OSCE—is able to come up with strategies and common goals. Why not the OSCE?

Perhaps it is a lack of imagination. Or, until recently, there may have been insufficient urgency. Maybe the lack of strategy is a good thing: Why waste time on negotiating or drafting nice words which have little impact? Defenders of this view would say that it is better to build peace on the ground than castles in the sky. Anyway, achieving consensus on a strategy on European security is almost impossible with so many states that are not like-minded and which no longer seem to share common assumptions or objectives. Furthermore, one must distinguish between the OSCE as a collection of states and OSCE executive structures. Although the OSCE has developed from being a conference to having executive structures, it is still led by its participating States. Indeed, the debate over the SPSU and the Secretary General's strategy-making role showed the unwillingness of some key countries to cede control over policy-relevant issues. And yet, it is clearly difficult to find common ground among fifty-seven national security strategies, especially if some countries regard each other as their biggest threat.

Whatever the reasons, the result is that the OSCE is constantly focused on its internal business, procedural issues, and the budget. There is seldom space to talk about bigger issues, despite the fact that there are so many of them. It is difficult to translate overall priorities into policy because no one can decide what the strategic priorities are. As a result, the

OSCE is trapped in a cycle of "business as usual" at precisely the moment when creative thinking and new approaches are urgently in demand. As Freedman has pointed out, "having a strategy suggests an ability to look up from the short term and the trivial to view the long term and the essential, to address causes rather than symptoms, to see woods rather than trees."[18] At the moment, the OSCE seems lost in the trees.

Recommendations: An iterative co-operative security agenda

Because of the war in Ukraine, it will be difficult for participating States to reach consensus on decisions in the Permanent or Ministerial Councils. It is hard to imagine an OSCE Summit with President Putin in attendance. Therefore, the OSCE's short-term strategy will be survival. However, muddling through and waiting for better days is not a way to plan for or shape the future. Hope is not a strategy. It is high time to start planning for a postwar Europe, and the OSCE is a logical place to do this. It should be an agent of change, not a product of it. But under the current circumstances, how can this be done?

The very act of working on a roadmap for stabilizing the situation in the OSCE area could provide a unifying agenda for OSCE participating States and give the Organization a sense of direction and purpose for the future. While the conditions are not the same as in 1972— since there is no consensus on the need for détente—the example of the Helsinki

process from 1972 to 1975 is a good inspiration for how participating States could work together on rebuilding security and co-operation in Europe as a result of an iterative consultation process.

There is no need to have a consensus-based decision to launch such a process. It could be developed using existing structures and processes. Indeed, the fact that most meetings are taking place in informal settings at the moment lends itself well to open-ended dialogue on the building blocks of a more co-operative European security order.

Nevertheless, the process requires leadership. Therefore, the OSCE Troika could come up with a roadmap for benchmarks between now and a possible high-level meeting in 2025 to correspond with the fiftieth anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act. Thinking strategically, the Troika could briefly analyze the current challenges and security context and set out the desired ends of a co-operative security agenda. This would set a common agenda for the next three years and take pressure off consecutive Chairpersonships to come up with their own annual priorities.

A key focus of the co-operative security agenda will have to be politico-military aspects of security, namely arms control, including de-escalation, disarmament, and confidence- and security-building measures. Making peace in Ukraine will be difficult. Even after the fighting stops between Russia and Ukraine, it will be hard to rebuild trust, both between Ukraine and Russia and between Russia and the West. Nonetheless, the OSCE is well suited, well positioned, and well equipped to do this, building on the

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existing framework for arms control. It would make sense to agree on an agenda of the Forum for Security Co-operation and the Structured Dialogue to ensure that there is a common understanding of the issues to be discussed. This could be a sub-strategy of the overall co-operative security agenda.

Furthermore, the Vienna Document on confidence- and security-building measures should be modernized, for example to adjust the thresholds for notifications and inspections of military exercises, to limit the deployment of forces and equipment close to borders, and to reduce the risk of snap exercises. De-confliction measures could also be agreed to prevent incidents and accidents at sea and in the air. Opportunities should be created for military-to-military contacts, for example to discuss military doctrines, force postures, threat perceptions, and the impact of new technologies and weapons systems.

As in the 1980s, the OSCE could be the place to negotiate arms control agreements. Furthermore, it could be a forum to discuss security guarantees, for example for countries "in between" Russia and the West (especially those where Russian troops are still stationed), as well as for Russia in relation to NATO.

A co-operative security agenda could also reflect on how to interpret fundamental principles for peace and security in Europe in the current security environment. As the current OSCE Chairperson-in-Office Foreign Minister Rau of Poland has suggested, OSCE participating States should discuss how they understand these principles today and how OSCE principles and commitments can be implemented more effectively.[19]

Other issues that could be considered as part of the European security dialogue could include a legally binding Charter for the OSCE, reviewing the system of annual rotating Chairpersonships, strengthening mechanisms for the pacific settlement of disputes, reforming the human dimension implementation review process, looking at the impact of technology on human rights and the media, and revising the rules of procedure to prevent gridlock caused by a lack of consensus. Participating States should also identify issues that require co-operation but which were not anticipated in the OSCE's founding documents, such as transnational organized crime, terrorism, and the impact of climate change on security, cyber security, and migration. At a minimum, the strategy should be to preserve as much as possible of the OSCE's normative framework.

Unfortunately, the SPSU has been scaled down, and nothing similar has been created in its place. The Troika is focused on daily business and keeping the OSCE afloat, most participating States are reluctant to discuss a more co-operative future, and Russia continues to attack Ukraine. So where will a strategy come from?

In the short term, it may be prudent to discuss ideas informally in Track 1.5 processes involving external experts and a self-selecting group of countries that are "friends of the OSCE." This would give participating States (and the Troika) some degree of deniability to discuss ideas that may not enjoy consensus

and without all fifty-seven participating States in attendance. But at the end of the day, decisions will have to be taken by participating States. Therefore, participating States—supported by the Secretariat—should at least use informal platforms for dialogue to think about and plan for the future.

Any strategy will obviously depend on the outcome of the war. Even those who think it is too early to discuss the future of European security must admit that it would be useful to have some ideas in the drawer for when it is time to start drawing up blueprints for the new security architecture. It is worth recalling that planning for a new international organization—which would eventually become the United Nations—started during the dark days of the Second World War, already in 1943.[20]

In short, now is the time for strategic thinking. The CSCE was designed to foster security and co-operation; during the Cold War it was not necessary to have co-operation in order to start discussing how to improve security. The OSCE cannot wait for stability to return to Europe—it should work towards it. Without a strategy, the OSCE has ended up in a place that is far from being the security community envisioned at the Astana Summit. It is time for a plan.

Notes

1   Walter Kemp also teaches at the Diplomatic Academy in Vienna and has recently published *Security and Cooperation: To the Same End* (Routledge, 2022). From 2018 to 2020 he was head of the Strategic Policy Support Unit in the office of the OSCE Secretary General.

2   Steven Heffington, Adam Oler, and David Tretler, eds., A National Security Strategy Primer (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2019), p. 1, https://nwc.ndu.edu/Portals/71/Documents/Publications/NWC-Primer-FINAL_for%20Web.pdf?ver=HOH30gam-KOdUOM2RFoHRA%3D%3D

3   CSCE, Final Act (Helsinki: August 1, 1975), https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/c/39501.pdf

4   CSCE, Charter of Paris for a New Europe (Paris: November 19–21, 1990), p. 12, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/6/39516.pdf

5   Vladimir Putin, Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy (Munich: February 10, 2007), http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034

6   OSCE, "Restoring Trust: The Corfu Process," December 1, 2010, https://www.osce.org/mc/87193

7   OSCE, Astana Commemorative Declaration, SUM.DOC/1/10/Corr.1* (Astana: December 3, 2010), p. 1, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/b/6/74985.pdf

8   OSCE, The OSCE Helsinki+40 Process, MC.DEC/3/12 (Dublin: December 7, 2012), p. 1, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/0/98309.pdf

9   OSCE, From Lisbon to Hamburg: Declaration on the Twentieth Anniversary of the OSCE Framework for Arms Control, MC.DOC/4/16 (Hamburg: December 9, 2016), p. 1, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/e/289496.pdf

10   Thomas Greminger, "Strengthening Co-operative Security in Difficult Times: Three Years as Secretary General of the OSCE (2017–2020) – a Critical Appraisal," in *Multilateralism in Transition: Challenges and Opportunities for the OSCE*,

eds. Simon J. A. Mason and Lisa Watanabe (Zürich: Center for Security Studies [CSS], ETH Zürich, 2021), 22–84; Thomas Greminger, Making the OSCE More Effective: Practical Recommendations from a Former Secretary General, IFSH (ed.), OSCE Insights 1/2021 (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2022), https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748911456-01

11   OSCE, Role of the OSCE Secretary General, MC.DEC/15/04 (Sofia: December 7, 2004), p. 1, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/0/29705.pdf

12   The Unit was headed by the author, Walter Kemp (Canadian).

13   Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), xi.

14   Miroslav Lajcak, OSCE Chairperson-in-Office and Minister for Foreign and European Affairs of Slovakia (Bratislava: December 20, 2019), https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/442771

15   Walter Kemp and Reinhard Krumm, eds., *Restoring European Security: From Managing Relations to Principled Cooperation* (Vienna: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2021).

16   Kemp and Krumm, cited above (Note 15), p. 39.

17   NATO, "Strategic Concepts," November 29, 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_56626.htm

18   Freedman, cited above (Note 13), p. ix.

19   Website of the Republic of Poland, "Minister Zbigniew Rau Inaugurates Renewed OSCE European Security Dialogue in Vienna," February 8, 2022, https://www.gov.pl/web/osce/minister-zbigniew-rau-inaugurates-renewed-osce-european-security-dialogue-in-vienna

20   Stephen C. Schlesinger, *Act of Creation: The Founding of the United Nations* (Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2003).