

EURASIA TASK FORCE

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INTERNATIONAL SECURITY PROGRAM
DINU PATRICIU EURASIA CENTER

Modernizing the OSCE: An Agenda Item for Astana

Once a beacon of democratic values and a broad concept of security linking all the states of Europe and Eurasia, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is gradually losing its sense of identity, purpose and means of effective engagement. As a result, it is also unable to maintain the high-level engagement of its member states. The most obvious evidence is the decision of the U.S. President not to attend the organization's first summit in over ten years.

The Astana summit on December 1-2, 2010 will not turn this situation around. Yet as challenges to democratic rights, economic reform, integration and prosperity, and human security persist across Europe and Eurasia, the OSCE still carries enormous potential. Imaginative leadership that brings ideas forward in each of the OSCE's three baskets can help to modernize the organization.

Making the OSCE more effective today requires a clear understanding what has made it effective or ineffective in the past. That past can be divided into three distinct phases since the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975.

The Post-Helsinki Years

The first phase was a period of non-consensus when East-West differences rendered the actual implementation of any concrete programs nearly impossible. The fact that the Helsinki Accords were signed in the first place was a remarkable achievement, attained only by the linkage of security negotiations with agreement on principles of political freedoms and human rights – unenforceable but real nonetheless.

The activities following from Helsinki were not even lodged in an organization, but instead pursued as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). Meeting every

few years in different cities, the CSCE created a vehicle for semi-permanent dialogue in which efforts were made to advance various aspects of the Helsinki Final Act.

In truth, little of a concrete nature was accomplished because of the need for consensus decision making among participant states. And yet this period marked an enormously important and ultimately successful period of the organization's existence. By legitimizing calls for human and political rights in Europe and creating a forum where these would be argued and debated between East and West, the CSCE created an essential political space for the advancement of human rights and democracy over time. The activities of the Helsinki Committees, Charter 77 in Prague and other off-shoots helped define the values at stake in communist repression in Europe, and laid the intellectual foundations for the end of the Cold War.

Likewise, the negotiations on Confidence and Security-Building Measures and Disarmament produced the Stockholm Document, which was later replaced by the Vienna Document, adding a measure of transparency and stability in conventional armaments across East and West.

The Years of the End of History

The second phase followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, when it became possible for the first time to reach consensus on a great range of issues among all participating states. This led to the foundation of the OSCE as an actual organization, rather than a mere conference, and to the creation of OSCE-based institutions. These include the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the Special Commissioners or Rapporteurs on issues ranging from media freedom to national minorities and religious

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tolerance and the establishment of field missions that contribute directly to stabilization, monitoring and human rights implementation.

This phase produced enormous success and optimism for continued, steady progress in seeing the fulfillment of the Helsinki Final Act's ambitions throughout Europe and Eurasia.

History Strikes Back

A third phase, however, began following the OSCE's Istanbul Summit in 1999, when challenges to democratic institutions and human rights again began to grow throughout Eurasia. While states such as Belarus or others in Central Asia had never truly implemented democratic systems, it was changes in Russia that made the critical difference. As Moscow moved to rein in the crony capitalism of the 1990s, it also began to reverse democratic practices and human freedoms at home and to assert a greater Russian role in what it defined as the "near abroad." By the mid- 2000's, efforts to "reform" the OSCE became in practice efforts to roll-back the OSCE's independent institutions and field missions. This has led to increasing difficulties in reaching consensus within the OSCE – evidenced, for example, by the lack of agreed statements from OSCE Ministerial meetings.

For the OSCE to be successful in this third phase of its existence – when it is again extremely difficult to reach consensus – it needs to take a page from its early history, when as a roving Conference on Security and Cooperation and in Europe, it managed to advance progress on democracy and human rights in Europe despite difficulties in reaching genuine consensus.

First Principles

In a sense, modernizing the OSCE for the 21st century means going back to original principles and emphasizing the founding precepts of the OSCE in all three baskets – political-military, economic and environmental and the human security dimension. This would mean a break with the recent practice of seeking a harmonious consensus, and instead being willing to tolerate more contentious, and more principled, debate within the organization. Such an approach will certainly carry risks to policies and activities, such as OSCE missions, which serve vital purposes. Yet failure to return to such principles would force the OSCE into a fatal compromise and is already leading to the growing irrelevance of the organization as a whole.

A Positive Agenda Based on U.S.-EU Partnership

Given the downward drift in the organization, the United States and the European Union (EU) should coordinate to launch a positive agenda for the OSCE that encompasses all three baskets. This will require imaginative and tough-minded leadership on the part of the United States, and a willingness of European states to play an assertive role within the OSCE itself. Development of a strong, coordinated approach within the OSCE should be an additional important item that can invigorate the U.S.-EU dialogue.

Effective pursuit of a positive U.S.-EU agenda in the OSCE would require the EU to revise one aspect of its approach to the organization – allowing only one member to speak on behalf of all. While commendable in terms of displaying European unity, this practice has had the unintended effect of minimizing the weight of those voices that support democratic practices and human rights, and bringing the European position on such issues down to a lowest common denominator. Although one EU state may speak on behalf of 27 members and a population of half a billion, it could appear outnumbered when six other non-democratic states raise their national voices. The EU should play a greater role in making sure its full weight, anchored on democratic values, is felt within the organization.

The Human Dimension

In the human dimension, the United States should expand its efforts to highlight specific challenges to existing agreed frameworks throughout the Euro-Atlantic area – recognizing that this will not lead to consensus among member states. As was the case in the CSCE years, it is more important to speak directly to the vision of the Helsinki Final Act than to succumb to a less meaningful consensus point of view.

Specifically, Washington should launch initiatives aimed at addressing the most pressing and salient issues affecting human rights in Europe and Eurasia today: defining and protecting the freedoms that should apply to actors in civil society and non-government organizations; investigating and demanding prosecutions in cases of violence and intimidation against journalists; and setting standards and monitoring implementation of judicial independence.

The Economic Dimension

Though traditionally the weakest of the OSCE's three baskets, the economic dimension is nonetheless important – and in this area, the role of the EU is critical. Brussels has successfully implemented standards of interstate commerce that provide for efficient, safe movement of goods throughout the European space. The EU can therefore play an essential role in helping to define and implement the extension of its best practices eastward. This should be done without any reference to prospects of EU membership, but with full emphasis on putting in place standards of secure and efficient transport that can lead to greater prosperity throughout Eurasia.

The Security Dimension

The security dimension within the OSCE has gone flat. Russia has suspended implementation of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), set impossible conditions for reviving the CFE, and proposed an alternative approach of a pan-European security treaty that de-links security from the other baskets and traditions of the OSCE.

Given the fundamental disagreements over the principle of host-nation consent, the merits of the “flank limits” and implementation of the existing treaty, which remains legally binding, it is impossible to conceive of meaningful progress in the CFE area. At the same time, because the numbers of conventional armaments in Europe and Eurasia are now far below the levels imagined in the original or even the Adapted CFE – whether measured nationally or in outmoded “bloc-to-bloc” terms – the inability to revive the treaty is not significant.

What remains significant, however, is the decline in transparency and confidence-building that has taken place over the past two decades. For this reason, a renewed, high-level effort should be made to update the Vienna

Document. As levels of armaments in Europe have fallen, the ceilings included in the Vienna Document are now well above actual or likely concentrations of forces. In order to increase transparency and confidence in Europe and Eurasia, we should bring these ceilings down to levels relevant for the 21st century.

While some steps are already being taken, efforts to modernize the Vienna Document thus far have been of only modest ambition, and without serious political backing. The goal should be to bring down substantially the ceilings necessary to trigger Vienna Document notifications, while increasing the possibilities for inspection. This can be accomplished without having to address the Istanbul Commitments on host-nation consent, which impede progress on CFE.

Vision, Strategy and Action

In the 35 years since the signing of the Helsinki Final Act, unimaginable progress has been made in implementation of the Helsinki principles throughout the Euro-Atlantic area. Yet this is neither universal nor complete.

The OSCE remains a vital institution for pursuing such implementation, provided the key democratic states in the organization have the vision and ingenuity to do so. A broad vision of a truly free, prosperous, secure and unified Euro-Atlantic area is the essential starting point. A joint U.S.-EU strategy can then promote such a vision by working together on all fronts to move forward with a positive agenda that restores the balance and vitality in each of the OSCE's three baskets. Such an approach will certainly lead to greater controversy and debate within the organization, but that is precisely what will make the OSCE relevant again in shaping the future of freedom in the Euro-Atlantic area.

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Eurasia as Part of Transatlantic Security

In the spring of 2010, the Atlantic Council launched a task force on “Eurasia as Part of Transatlantic Security” with the task of developing a coherent, effective U.S. strategy toward Eurasia. Chaired by Atlantic Council Chairman Senator **Chuck Hagel**, who as a U.S. Senator visited all five Central Asian republics, the project draws on experts from the Atlantic Council network with deep experience in Eurasia, transatlantic security and OSCE matters. To inform the task force’s policy recommendations, Atlantic Council President and CEO **Frederick Kempe** led a delegation consisting of Ambassador Ross Wilson, Damon Wilson, Boyko Nitzov and Jeff Lightfoot to Vienna, Austria, Astana, Kazakhstan and Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in June to meet with government representatives, OSCE officials and members of civil society. This project seeks to shape the transatlantic debate on security in Eurasia and the future of the OSCE by publishing policy-relevant issue briefs, organizing strategy sessions with senior officials and issuing a task force report.

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