The OSCE: Entering a third phase in its third decade

Walter Kemp

The OSCE turns thirty next summer and is entering the third phase of its existence. This article looks at the OSCE in transition, tracing its first two phases of development and comparing them to the Organization in the context of contemporary challenges and a new security architecture. Particular attention will be paid to the effect of EU and NATO enlargement on the OSCE, and the Organization’s relevance — particularly to States that are neither in the Union nor the Alliance. It concludes by reflecting on the current debate on reform and sketching the way ahead for the OSCE.

Phase one: Dialogue and co-operation
The CSCE was a child of the Cold War. The first phase of its existence — from the 1975 Helsinki Final Act to the 1990 Charter of Paris — was defined by the East-West divide. The very reason for the CSCE’s creation was to bridge that divide and to foster security through co-operation. The hallmarks of this phase were:
- a loose conference culture as regards the meetings;
- a strong focus on political dialogue;
- designation of issues into three baskets or dimensions;
- a close linkage between the human and politico-military aspects of security;
- multilateral diplomacy centred around three clusters: Warsaw Pact, neutral and non-aligned States, North Atlantic Treaty Organization;
- development of confidence- and security-building measures.

The CSCE in this first phase was instrumental in fostering détente, it created an acquis of human dimension commitments that inspired human rights activists, dissidents, and anti-Communist reformers, and it was a forum for dialogue between East and West at a time when possibilities for such contacts were limited.

The Helsinki process can be credited with helping to end the Cold War. As a result, in 1990 some people questioned the need for continuing the CSCE. If the point of the CSCE was to foster security through co-operation and this had been achieved, then the CSCE was a victim of its own success and was no longer necessary.

Phase two: Managing transition
However, events in the early 1990s suggested that the CSCE should be strengthened and transformed, not eliminated. With the collapse of Communism,
Europe was faced with new opportunities, but also serious challenges. The transition from communism to democracy would not be as quick and dramatic as the events of 1989/90. Civil society needed bolstering, inter-ethnic conflict had to be prevented, and good neighbourly relations had to be encouraged. Existing European organizations and structures were insufficient for dealing with these challenges.

As a result, the CSCE was transformed and strengthened. Institutions — like the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the High Commissioner on National Minorities and later the representative on Freedom of the Media — were established. Field operations (missions) were launched, and political dialogue was made more permanent. These changes were reflected in the renaming of the CSCE into the OSCE, effective as of 1 January 1995.

This second phase was characterized by:

- creation of Institutions;
- establishment of field operations;
- creation of a Secretariat/Secretary General;
- establishment of permanent forums for political dialogue, led by a Chairmanship-in-Office;
- strong emphasis on early warning and conflict prevention, particularly in relation to national minority issues and in countries in post-Communist transition;
- limited success in crisis management, for example in Chechnya, Tajikistan, Kosovo and in dealing with ‘frozen conflicts’ in Georgia, Moldova, and between Armenia and Azerbaijan;
- concentration on post-conflict rehabilitation in the Balkans;
- main focus of activities on the former Soviet Union, Balkans, and EU accession countries.

By the turn of the millennium, many of the countries where the OSCE had been active in the early 1990s were well on the way to NATO and EU membership. Others were introducing democratic reforms and attracting increased international investment. If the point of the OSCE after 1990 had been to assist in the process of post-Communist transition and that process was now well advanced, some are now asking why the OSCE is still relevant or even necessary today.

**Third phase: Promoting integration**

The OSCE is now entering a Third Phase. The beginning of this phase can be traced to the OSCE’s attempts to cope with new threats and challenges to security (post 9/11/01) as well as the enlargement of NATO and the EU. Thus far, this third phase can be characterized by:

- reduction of OSCE activities in EU accession countries (i.e. Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia, Romania and Hungary);
- increased focus on Central Asia and the Caucasus;
- close co-operation with the UN, EU and NATO in South Eastern Europe;
- greater attention to the politico-military aspects of security (small arms and