Time to Prune the OSCE Tree

Walter Kemp

There has been a lot of talk about reforming the OSCE. As one diplomat quipped, never has so much been said by so many for so little. If the OSCE is going to make progress on strengthening its effectiveness, it needs to show results by the end of 2006. Otherwise it risks becoming more narcissistic than operational. Of course, some may argue that the OSCE is not broke, so the whole reform process should anyway be wrapped up as soon as possible. But that would be a wasted opportunity. What the OSCE needs is some pruning, cutting back the wild growth of the past decade and allowing the main shoots to bear sweeter fruit. This article suggests how and why that should be done.

A four-letter word

Whenever States or experts try to set priorities for the OSCE, they land up with a shopping list, or a Christmas tree. This is excused by the old catch-all cliché that the OSCE has a comprehensive approach to security, so everything goes. The problem is, as a result nobody knows what the OSCE stands for, what its profile is, and what it is good at. It risks becoming a jack of all trades, but a master of none. The OSCE needs a reality check, based on the four letters in its acronym. Is it an ‘Organization’? What does it do to promote ‘Security’? Is its approach based on ‘Co-operation’? And where is ‘Europe’?

Let us look at these one at a time. The OSCE is not really an international organization. It has no clear legal personality. This presents problems when drawing up contracts, dealing with taxation issues, and solving questions of the status of staff members. This can be solved easily enough by a convention on privileges and immunities.

The bigger question is what the OSCE’s mandate is. In a sense, its mandate is whatever States last decided, backed up by previous decisions and practices. Since there is no guiding Charter, one has to interpret the Helsinki Final Act, taking into account all the relevant subsequent decisions.

The problem is, there has been no Summit since 1999 and the world has changed a lot since then. Even if there is a lack of consensus on the need for an OSCE Charter, there should surely be a broad understanding on the need for a high-level meeting to define the OSCE in the context of current realities, and to agree on exactly what the Organization stands for.

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But then that gets back to the question of priorities. What is the OSCE for today? If it was designed to foster security through co-operation during the Cold War and that has been achieved, and then it was transformed to deal with the process of post-Communist transition and that is more or less done, why do we still need the OSCE?

To answer this question, we should focus on the next two letters in the OSCE acronym, namely ‘S’ and ‘C’ for ‘Security’ and ‘Co-operation’.

What can 55 States do through the OSCE to promote security that they can not do somewhere else, like in NATO or the UN? That is a question that needs to be answered, and convincingly.

One of the OSCE’s strengths is its membership. Some of the OSCE’s biggest security challenges are in countries that are outside the EU and NATO, and require assistance that can not be provided by the Council of Europe. The OSCE can build security in the Balkans, in countries in the region between the EU and Russia (i.e. Moldova, Belarus and Ukraine), as well as in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. That security can be built through dialogue, confidence and security building measures, conflict prevention and crisis management, as well as strengthening good governance and the rule of law.

This must be done co-operatively. The application of standards, the funding of projects, and the monitoring of elections must all be done in a way that generates confidence in the credibility and even-handedness of the Organization. If not, it will lose its legitimacy in the eyes of its most important clients, and be regarded as a tool of certain interests. That, I would argue, was one of the main reasons for the crisis that the OSCE faced in 2004/05.

There is a push for the OSCE to do more ‘out of area’. This is highly questionable. The ‘E’ in ‘OSCE’ is already poorly defined, but it is big enough. ‘Partners for Co-operation’ is a creative formula for deepening contacts with interested states, but there are still no clear guidelines on what the criteria for partnership are, and what partnership entails. Indeed, the OSCE has done more with the Palestinian Authority (which is neither a state nor a Partner) than it has with Mongolia (which could even make a case for being a participating State). Yes, the OSCE should reach out to assist adjacent areas, and share expertise with other regions of the world. But it has enough to do within its own area, and should avoid getting sucked into conflicts that could divert resources, expertise and time away from core activities.

Core activities

So what are those core activities? What are the trunk and main branches of this OSCE tree? After all, the OSCE is famous for its flexibility. But it is easy to be flexible if you have no backbone. The OSCE needs to clearly demonstrate what it stands for, and what it can deliver.

As I have noted, the OSCE is a security organization. It is not a quasi-NGO, or a project-driven organization, an economic incubator or even a human rights body. It is, at its core, a security organization and everything it does should have