The Politico-Military Dimension of OSCE

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Politico-military issues have always been a part of the CSCE process and its successor, the OSCE, but with a significantly different content and overtones at different times. It was originally the NATO side that insisted on registering the need to address Europe’s problems of military confrontation as part of the CSCE CSCE’s remit, as well as demanding tough and specific asymmetrical cuts from the Warsaw Pact in the framework of the separate Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions (MBFR) negotiations. In a later reversal of fortunes, CSCE was to provide the framework for launching an alternative ‘Conventional Armed Forces in Europe’ (CFE) arms control process, which eventually succeeded where MBFR failed in setting firm ceilings at least for major conventional armaments in Europe. Special to CSCE from the start, however, was its very broad multifunctional agenda including the other two ‘baskets’ of economic relations and the human dimension.

As the years have passed the balance of emphasis between CSCE’s/OSCE’s original three dimensions has fluctuated, both in response to the radically changing demands of the European environment and because of more inward-looking political and institutional dynamics. Most recently, when the Russian Federation and other states started driving a particular agenda for ‘reform’ in the OSCE, they argued among other things that the politico-military dimension had been relatively devalued as a result of Western over-emphasis on issues like human rights and

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also because the 'jewel in the crown'— the Adapted version of the CFE Treaty — has been prevented from entering into force by specific disagreements among various OSCE members. The OSCE community as a whole has shown enough sympathy or at least interest in the contention about a neglected military dimension to make it possible to hold a special two-day Military Doctrine seminar — the first since the terrorist attacks of ‘9/11’ — at Vienna on 14-15 February 2006.

This article will briefly review the relevance, strengths and weaknesses, and further potential of OSCE’s politico-military work today, starting by drawing the contrast in more detail between the environment of CSCE’s early years and that facing the members of Europe’s extended security community in the early 21st century. It will question OSCE’s competence and ability to tackle some of the more prominent features of today’s special mix of threats and risks, but also point to services that the OSCE is providing and can provide, sometimes merely by virtue of existing (and by the existence of its acquis). The paper ends with some ideas about where OSCE might most usefully focus its security-related efforts in the near to medium term.

The Cold War and today
The defining feature of the Cold War environment was the massive confrontation of two heavily armed rival blocs — NATO and the Warsaw Treaty organization (WTO, Warsaw Pact) — across the ‘Iron Curtain’ in central Europe. This gave a powerful rationale for all efforts, including those made in the CSCE framework, to reduce the risk of war by reducing either the forces themselves or, if that was not possible, at least the resulting tensions and risks of surprise attack. Another difference from today was that for most of the twentieth century, military affairs — including the tasks and physical dispositions of armed forces — were rather clearly demarcated from other aspects of national and international business. Neither ‘homeland security’ nor any specific aspect of it like counter-terrorism was part of the East-West agenda, and conflict intervention was something that was done by the UN. The almost complete lack of contact or overlap between the work at that time of NATO and the European Communities — despite their strongly overlapping memberships — illustrates the point. Against this background, nothing could have seemed more natural to CSCE’s designers than to put both the ‘harder’ and ‘softer’ aspects of the new body’s military-related work,