Environmental security: ways ahead for the OSCE

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’Sustainable development is a compelling moral and humanitarian issue, but it is also a security imperative. Poverty, environmental degradation and despair are destroyers of people, of societies, of nations. This unholy trinity can destabilise countries, even entire regions’ — Colin Powell, 1999.

Introduction

We are constantly reminded that the ‘founding fathers’ of the CSCE at the height of the Cold War were astonishingly far-sighted and comprehensive in laying down the foundations of durable values and ideals for what would be a strategically significant Eurasian geographical space. They in fact saw 30 years into the future and recognised that economic and environmental considerations would be among the defining features that participating States of the OSCE would be dealing with now.

In bundling together the three ‘baskets’ or ‘dimensions’ of commitments, Article X of the Helsinki Decalogue states unambiguously that ‘All of the (nine) principles set forth above are of primary significance and, accordingly, they will be equally and unreservedly applied, each of them being interpreted taking into account the others’.

Within the OSCE much lip-service has been paid to a comprehensive approach to security but participating States had to struggle more to turn rhetoric in the 2nd dimension into reality in the same way they had done with the human and military dimensions. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any conclusive discussion on economic issues before 1990 when the fundamental premises were diametrically opposed or any attention to environmental protection when awareness of ‘sustainability’ was largely in its infancy. Nevertheless, one might have expected a dramatic rise in importance of the economic and environmental dimension during the 1990s.

The fact that this rise has taken place only during these opening years of the new century has led some to pose the question of whether the OSCE is no longer the flexible organisation it once was. The world around the OSCE has changed considerably in 30 years and participating States of the OSCE have been challenged to respond sufficiently. With the continued growth of the Organization, is the OSCE witnessing a certain institutional lethargy and ‘two-dimensional path dependency’? Many participating States have been vocal about this and have called for a rebalancing of the dimensions.²

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² In a notable example, Central Asian states spoke with one voice at the 14th OSCE Economic
Despite these calls, few substantive suggestions have been made on how to achieve this. Which areas should the Economic and Environmental Dimension (EED) pay particular attention to in fulfilling the Maastricht Strategy\(^3\)? Where is the ‘added value’? 

From a functional point of view, an example given by the first Coordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities, Tom Price, provides some clarity. He once used the example of a major railway junction with one trunk line leading into it and many spurs leading away from it. When a security problem comes to the attention of the OSCE, similar to a locomotive arriving at the junction, it has a few options. It can deal with the problem and send it back to where it came from. Or it may decide that one of its partners can best handle the problem and send it down one of the spur lines. On other occasions the problem may be so multifaceted that the OSCE can deal directly only with part of it and the other parts have to be sent off along different spur lines to partners.\(^4\)

I do not intend to go over the provisions of the Istanbul, Bonn or Maastricht decisions, as most readers will no doubt be familiar with these a priori and can attest that they are unambiguous, comprehensive and politically binding.\(^5\) Nevertheless, they are also rather general documents which do not lay out a road-map or strategy on how the OSCE should proceed to fulfil them nor which ones should be prioritized. This article is an attempt to illustrate some of those ‘locomotives’ which the OSCE can, even in part, deal with in the coming years.

**The environment and security**

From the outset, we should ask ourselves why the OSCE participating States should pay the same attention to the environment as they do to, say, human rights or the Forum for Security and Cooperation (FSC). Indeed, the elasticity of thought required to see the environment as a security pre-requisite is, at first glance, larger compared with activities under treaties such as the Treaty on Open Skies, the FSC or the Action against Terrorism Unit.

However, the awakening to the link between security and the environment and the economy is already taking place. For those still asleep, this awakening could prove to be rather abrupt. While energy depletion, economic collapse or limited nuclear war are disastrous in themselves, they may be repaired within a

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\(^3\) OSCE Strategy Document for the Economic and Environmental Dimension, OSCE Ministerial Council 2003, Maastricht, the Netherlands.


\(^5\) Based on previous references in the Istanbul, Bonn, etc...documents to the importance of economic development and environmental protection for security, the 2003 Maastricht economic and environmental strategy was based on an assessment of the current situation and of existing threats to security in these fields. Taking into account the OSCE’s strengths, it outlined the main objectives, principles and methods of co-operation in the economic and environmental dimension.