The Role of the Conflict Prevention Centre in the Security System of the CSCE

Ettore Greco

Introduction
One of the main objectives of the decisions taken at the last CSCE Helsinki Summit (9-10 July 1992) was the strengthening and updating of the instruments and mechanisms for conflict prevention and crisis management. In fact, in the months prior to the summit, there was a growing awareness of the need for a rethinking of the very foundations of the security system set up by the CSCE.

During the period of East-West confrontation, the main concern was the danger of a surprise attack or large-scale offensive launched by one alliance against another along internationally recognized borders. The arms control system and the confidence and security building measures (CSBMs) developed within the CSCE were essentially conceived to counter this specific kind of threat, typical of the bipolar system. With the dissolution of the Eastern block, this threat has disappeared.

In the meantime, the traditional concept of 'international conflict' — meaning a conflict among states or groups of states — underlining most of the methods of conflict prevention of international institutions, has become largely obsolete. This is particularly true of the system of CSBMs operating within the CSCE framework and implemented by the Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC). This system was created essentially to prevent military border attacks — in particular, large-scale surprise and offensive attacks, to reduce the risk of accidental war and to deter the possible use of military force for coercion or intimidation. The more or less explicit theory on which the CSBM system is based underlines the role that misunderstandings, misperceptions and the lack of correct information can play in provoking or fuelling conflicts. This explains the importance given to an efficient communications network and to military transparency.

It is evident that this grid of conceptual assumptions can be applied to a rather limited number of potential conflicts in post-Cold War Europe. In fact, the system of CSBMs contained in the Vienna Document 1990 and the Vienna Document 1992 proved to be totally useless in preventing the new conflicts that have broken out in Europe — conflicts that have been triggered mostly by internal tensions within states. Yet, the danger remains that some of these conflicts, although geographically limited today — often within the borders of a single state — could extend to involve a growing number of states. Given that, it would be wrong to consider the present system of CSBMs totally antiquated and ineffectual: it can still have considerable efficacy in preventing conflicts between states.
The ambitious programme approved in Helsinki is aimed at creating a new global system of conflict prevention and management based on a plurality of instruments and institutions.

The effort was made, in particular, to create, at both institutional and operational levels, a closer and more effective link between the human dimension activities (third basket) and the crisis prevention ones (which were traditionally part of the first basket relating to security). The experience of the most recent conflicts in Europe has indeed shown that the protection of human rights is often inextricably connected with security. The basic principle affirmed in Helsinki is that a permanent control and verification of the respect of human rights obligations can substantially contribute to the prevention of conflicts, especially the internal ones. In fact, the flagrant and repeated violation of certain human rights — especially minority rights — can lead to civil wars which, in turn, can sometimes spread to the surrounding international environment, producing increasingly uncontrollable spirals.

In this new system, the CPC has been given a role that seems limited but also multidirectional. Indeed, the name itself, ‘Conflict Prevention Centre’, does not correspond to the actual functions of the institution. On the one hand, it has been assigned duties that go beyond mere conflict prevention; on the other, important functions that are an integral part of that activity have been attributed to other CSCE institutions. In view of coming meetings, especially the Review Conference to be held in Budapest from 10 October to 2 December 1994, the debate on the future role of the CPC seems more open than ever. In order to achieve the rationalization of the CSCE institutional structure which is increasingly considered an urgent priority and which will hopefully be begun in Budapest, one of the problems that must be dealt with is a more coherent and efficient distribution of conflict prevention and management tasks among CSCE organs.

The Origins of the CPC

The CSBM system was the first operational instrument for conflict prevention adopted by the CSCE. But the first two ‘generations’ of CSBMs, approved in Helsinki (1975) and Stockholm (1986), respectively, did not provide for any kind of permanent multilateral mechanism for consultation and verification. Even the CSBM regime established at the Stockholm Conference was, in fact, implemented exclusively on a bilateral level.

The idea of creating a CSCE organ specifically charged with promoting security through permanent conflict prevention activity was first put forward at the opening of the Vienna CSBM negotiations (March 1989) by four Warsaw Pact countries: Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic and Hungary. The new organ was to operate as a centre for information and consultation with the main aim of reducing the risks of surprise attack. The frame of reference for the proposal was therefore still East-West confrontation. But most of the countries considered the proposal premature or unrealis-