The OSCE and Cooperative Security

Andrei Zagorski

There is an obvious temptation to derive the contemporary understanding of the concept of the Cooperative Security and that of the indivisibility of security from the early documents of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), i.e. to assert that both served as an underlying basis of the 1975 CSCE Helsinki Final Act. This is not exactly true.

A reference to the ‘indivisibility of security’, indeed, finds itself in the Final Act. But its reading remained disputed for a long time. Western countries and a few in the Eastern Block (particularly Romania) asserted that the Helsinki principles were to apply not only in relations between East and West but also within the Eastern Block, thus implicitly renouncing the ‘Brezhnev doctrine’ which justified military intervention in order to prevent the erosion of the Soviet domination of East Central Europe.

This proposition was never tested but the concept of indivisibility of security (or of détente) served as a point of reference after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. This time the controversy focused on the issue of whether security in Europe was separable from that in other parts of the world, i.e. whether the CSCE participating states were bound to observe the Helsinki principles only in relations with each other or with other nations, as well.

Both interpretations were contested by the Soviet Union and were never spelled out in the CSCE documents. The debate over the indivisibility of security, however, already at an early point was focused on the indiscriminate implementation of the Helsinki principles and commitments within the entire CSCE area. This became very much the focus of the concept of Cooperative Security over the past two decades.

There was no notion of Cooperative Security in the CSCE documents until 1992, when the Helsinki summit called for establishing new security relations among the participating states ‘based upon co-operative and common approaches to security’.

This notion should not be mixed with the concept of cooperation during the Cold War. The latter was described in the 1967 Harmel Report and suggested that further development of the NATO defense posture should not prevent political consultation and economic cooperation with the adversary Soviet Block. Limited East-West cooperation during the Cold War, however, was not supposed to replace confrontation or to curb the arms race but, rather, was expected to help in reducing the imminent risks thereof.

The Soviet doctrine of the ‘reduction of international tensions’ entailed...
similar policy implications which, in the end, made détente and the CSCE process possible.

**Concepts of Cooperative Security**

The Cooperative Security concept was introduced only after the end of the Cold War. It reflected a shift in the defense and security policy towards greater emphasis of multilateralism in order to transcend unilateral or alliance based action that would not exclude coercion or enforcement of specific policy goals. The concept was introduced by a group of American scholars in 1992. As put by one of the authors, Ashton Carter, it was supposed to provide ‘a new organizing principle for thinking about the world and how to act in it’.  

While the Harmel Report encouraged cooperation to complement, not to replace the military competition of the Cold War adversaries, Cooperative Security was aimed exactly at transcending the latter. Starting with the principle that defense of national territory was the only legitimate purpose of national military forces, it sought to prevent states from assembling or using the means for an offensive by committing them to regulate and to keep transparent to each other the size, technical composition, investment patterns and operational practices of all military forces by mutual consent.

The Cooperative Security concept would not stop at encouraging confidence building and arms control but would seek to expand cooperation to other relevant areas. Multiple projects launched in the 1990s, such as the Cooperative Threat Reduction, or the G8 sponsored Global Partnership in preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction continue representing sustainable Cooperative Security practices.

The past two decades witnessed proliferation of the Cooperative Security vocabulary. It became fashion and could not avoid inflation. However, it revealed a remarkable evolution from seeking mutual security reassurance through an increasingly multilateral action grounded in consensus, law, international institutions and regimes to respond to new security threats. It penetrated military establishments which adapted the concept for the purpose of developing a more integrated policy to enhance regional stability and prevent or mitigate crises.

---

5. According to the US Department of Defense, Cooperative Security is a ‘set of continuous, long-term, integrated, comprehensive actions among a broad spectrum of US and international governmental and nongovernmental partners that maintains or enhances stability, prevents or mitigates crises, and enables other operations when crises occur. The military contribution to these efforts focuses on mobilizing cooperation and building relationships to enhance regional security’. *Military Contribution to Cooperative Security*, Security and Human Rights 2010 no. 1.