Collective Security and the politico-military role of the OSCE

Alyson Bailes and Zdzislaw Lachowski

Cooperative security: past and present
In April 1992, the Carnegie Corporation of New York sponsored a conference at Stanford to consider whether the end of the Cold War had opened the way for an era of cooperative security based on multinational action to suppress conflict worldwide. The more sceptical speakers pointed out that even if the USA had lost its chief enemy, plenty of states still saw each other as enemies elsewhere in the world. Europe’s own success in cooperative security, and progress towards a wider ‘collective security’, might still be put to the test as the new Russia and the new Eastern Europe embarked on their transition. Looking back from early 2010, it is hard not to see even these arguments as charmingly optimistic. In the intervening years the USA and the West in general have discovered new enemies such as Al-Qaeda, and new challenges like the rise of China, without putting the old strategic tensions with Russia entirely behind them. A recent US Administration has sought security by starting new conflicts (Afghanistan and Iraq) rather than suppressing them. Along the way, many of the achievements of former East-West relations in Europe, including the high priority given to disarmament, have withered on the vine and the body most identified with cooperative security — the OSCE — finds its authority and raison d’être more threatened than in the Cold War’s darkest days.

Such paradoxes are easier to find when the underlying concepts are themselves shaky. For a start, cooperative security cannot be simply equated with the CSCE/OSCE legacy or the experiences of Europe as such. The earliest attempts in modern history to organize common action against violations of the peace were made at the global level in the League of Nations and more recently in the United Nations; while many different regions have tried and are still trying to adapt the formula to their own needs. Outside Europe, cooperative regional security is generally interpreted as a move towards inclusive multilateralism through the creation or strengthening of collective, rule-based institutions. Europe with its many criss-crossing organizations may seem well ahead in that respect: but here the institutions themselves have also become part of the problem, when they divide or discriminate among states and compete, overlap with or get in the way of each other. Even the OSCE has had its demarcation disputes with the Council of Europe and European Union in particular. A distinction is thus needed between

---

1 Prof. Alyson Bailes is a Visiting Professor at the University of Iceland, specializing in security studies. Dr. Zdzislaw Lachowski is Senior Fellow on the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Programme on Euro-Atlantic Security.

how advanced the European ‘model’ is in its experimentation with new international governance, and how successful it has been in terms of actual security production.

The Helsinki Legacy
If we ask how the CSCE/OSCE process has sought cooperative security in the specific politico-military dimension, the Helsinki Final Act of 1975\(^3\) is the first place to look for the nature, limitations, and possible contradictions of the concept. With hindsight, three things stand out:

- Like the UN Charter and understandably given the Cold War confrontation, the Final Act focuses on the avoidance of war or non-military coercion, and hence on correct behaviour and respect for ‘sovereign equality and individuality (…) territorial integrity (…) freedom and political independence’\(^4\) among nation-states. The first, and well-known, potential contradiction this creates is with the possibility of dynamic political change — as also acknowledged and protected in the Final Act. But it also tends to exclude non-state actors and non-state challenges, including internal conflict and the maintenance of internal order, from the ‘cooperative’ agenda;

- For similar reasons, most politico-military commitments created by the Final Act (and later additions to the corpus) involve ‘refraining’ from something (threat or use of force, intervention, coercion etc.) that might disturb the status quo, rather than committing states to work positively and create something new together. The main actions called for relate to confidence building measures, also geared essentially to conflict avoidance, and the attempt to solve disputes by other more peaceful means. This culture of avoidance or ‘negative peace’ is consistent with the 20th-century origins of the cooperative security idea, but it largely lacks the notion of active and creative security building that has come to dominate the post-Cold War agenda;

- The Final Act also calls for positive actions towards ‘lessening military confrontation and promoting disarmament’ in Europe, against the background of broader UN commitments. Just as the whole concept of confidence and security building measures (CSBMs) assumes that armed force activities are inherently risky and provocative, the CSCE/OSCE process treats armaments as inherently problematic and causally linked to Europe’s own legacy of conflict. This approach has made it difficult to ‘capture’ within the CSCE/OSCE framework other purposes and uses of military capabilities such as internal security and deployments outside Europe — two of the more problematic issues in OSCE states’ actual behaviour since 1989 especially.

Finally, the Final Act was ahead of its time in creating and trying to balance three


\(^4\) Terms used in the first of the ten guiding principles of the Final Act.