

*Eric Mlyn*

## The United States, Russia and the OSCE in 21st Century European Security

### *Where Does the OSCE Stand Today?*

It has been over a decade since the OSCE held its second Summit Meeting of Heads of State or Government of all OSCE participating States. In signing the "Charter of Paris for a New Europe" in November of 1990, OSCE members reaffirmed their commitments to OSCE principles and began the on-going process of the institutionalization of the OSCE. The past decade witnessed the full transformation of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) to what is now by any account a true international organization.

The debates over the shape and role of the OSCE in the 1990s are, in some senses a thing of the past. This is not at all to say that all 55 members of the OSCE are in full agreement as to the nature of the OSCE and its role in European security. Major differences exist between participating States. However, the nature of these debates has clearly changed. The United States has always insisted on the primacy of NATO in the European security landscape. Similarly, the Russian Federation had, during the 1990s, attempted to halt the enlargement of NATO and continually proposed, with very little support from other nations, that the OSCE become the overarching security organization for Europe. Others who envisioned the OSCE as the core for a pan-European security system joined the Russians. And though there have been some compromises along the way, for example, the renaming of the CSCE to the OSCE at the 1994 Budapest Summit, in part as a nod to Russian desire to have the OSCE play a more central role in European security, the United States has won the battle for NATO primacy and for keeping the OSCE in what may best be termed a supporting role.

It is probably also fair to say that, up to this point, the US position has held its ground without any of the negative security consequences that OSCE advocates and opponents of NATO enlargement feared. For example, despite fears that the first round of NATO enlargement to Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic would isolate Russia and strain her relations with the Western Alliance, recent events seem to suggest that these worst fears will not be realized, at least in the short to medium term. This is not to say that NATO enlargement was and is a good thing, though this is not the place for such a debate.

Today, debates are not and should not be about how the OSCE fits into the broader European security architecture. Instead, it is now time to more appropriately ask what is the OSCE? Though some OSCE advocates continue

to be disappointed by the supporting role that the OSCE plays, others are now coming to appreciate the wide variety of innovative instruments that the OSCE has developed in the fields of democratization, conflict prevention and post-conflict rehabilitation. Through trial and error, fits and starts and good healthy inclusive debates along the way, the OSCE, with a budget of almost 200 million US dollars, now has a rich repertoire of tools at its disposal. The wide variety and geographic scope of its activities are impressive. Not developed with any single vision in mind, the OSCE has sometimes led, sometimes responded, but has always been involved, to one degree or another, in the central security issues of post-Cold War Europe.

Of course, having numerous tools is not the same as effectiveness, and many critics of the OSCE point to an unwieldy decision-making process, inadequate organizational accountability, poorly trained field missions and the lack of a military capacity as evidence of the Organization's lack of meaningful impact on the ground. Observers note that one can hardly look at Kosovo and Chechnya, two areas very much within the OSCE security space, and point to them as models for conflict prevention and ethnic reconciliation. Measuring the effectiveness of the OSCE is important but extremely difficult. International research in places such as the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) in Washington D.C. and the Centre for OSCE Research (CORE) in Hamburg has an important role to play in telling the story of the OSCE and aiding in its assessment. Such evaluations are essential for a full assessment of the OSCE. Suffice it to say, for our purposes here, that increased international attention to the Organization can only help its prospects for continuing to play a vital role in Eurasia, as more scholars and practitioners study and evaluate the Organization. This is particularly important in the United States where there is minimal knowledge of the OSCE and little attention is paid to the OSCE.

#### *The OSCE in the Context of US-Russian Relations*

The OSCE did not become what it is by any grand design, and this is what makes it so interesting. From 1975-1990, it was a response to the Cold War, an awkward instrument for dialogue and negotiation during even the darkest days of the East-West divide. From 1990 to the present, it has for the most part developed as a response to the *end of the Cold War* and *the Balkan wars*. For the former, it filled a vacuum in a variety of issues all relating to the human dimension of security including freedom of the media, free and fair elections, and language rights, to name just a few. The OSCE has in this case facilitated the transition of the former Soviet Union. With regard to the Balkan wars, the OSCE has specialized in certain aspects of post-conflict rehabilitation, including the complicated and thorny issues of resettlement of refugees, the establishment of electoral systems and training of local police. It should also be noted that the OSCE's supporting role status prevented it from

becoming the lead international organization in post-conflict Kosovo. Though it was the most important international presence in Kosovo before the NATO bombing, the sheer magnitude of the rebuilding required that the United Nations oversee the international community's efforts in Kosovo. The emergence of the United Nations as the lead organization in post-war Kosovo underscored the limited role that the OSCE could play.

Though grave warnings were often voiced regarding NATO enlargement and the Russian's expressed hopes that the OSCE would somehow serve as *the* true comprehensive security organization for Europe, these dreams of OSCE advocates will surely not be realized soon. And the Russians, despite some protests about NATO and the role of the OSCE in Russia and its sphere of influence, seem to have accepted this reality. Russian assertions that the OSCE is the only possible organization that could support and maintain a Europe whole and free are less frequent. Nonetheless, tensions exist and some Russian cries of foul still creep into the debate. The following quote is a good example of this: "Today, the OSCE is neither involved in co-operation (there is blatant dictate instead) nor, even less, in security since the very presence of the OSCE has become a warning for any country of the imminent loss of its sovereignty, whether in full or in part. There is already even a kind of popular saying: first the OSCE, and then NATO (or more precisely the USA)."<sup>1</sup>

Four points serve to illustrate the new Russian pragmatism in its relations with the United States. *First*, US-Russian co-operation after September 11 has been extensive. Current US Ambassador to the OSCE Stephan Minikes and US Ambassador to the Russian Federation Alexander Vershbow wrote that "(w)hile the NATO Alliance evoked its self defense clause for the first time in its history in the aftermath of September 11, it is no less true that the Russian Federation responded to these events as we would expect an Ally to do".<sup>2</sup> From meaningful logistical support through such actions as allowing the US to station US troops in Central Asia and the Caucasus, to general rhetorical and moral support, September 11 well illustrated that the United States still needs Russian co-operation to address some of the world's most dangerous security problems. This recognition was good for the United States and Russia and has helped to solidify this still important bilateral relationship.

*Second*, though the Russians are still not pleased with the US decision on 13 December 2001 to withdraw from the ABM Treaty in order to pursue National Missile Defense (NMD), the most recent Russian reaction has been quite muted. Ten years ago, few would have predicted such a response to what was then perceived as an action that would cause irreparable harm to

---

1 Nezavisimaya Gazeta of 15 February 2002, cited in: OSCE Newsletter 3/2002, p. 16.

2 Alexander Vershbow/Stephan Minikes, Russia and OSCE: Enhancing Security Cooperation to Russia's South, in: Kommersant of 3 April 2002, from the web site of the United States Mission to the OSCE, <http://www.usosce.rpo.at/archive/2002/04/3op-ed.htm>.

US-Russian relations. President Vladimir Putin had earlier threatened that Russia would pull out of some existing arms control treaties with the United States; but the recent signing of a new strategic arms control treaty is strong evidence that the US withdrawal will not provoke a serious backlash in Russia. Celeste Wallander sums this up well when she writes: "The Russian government has bet it will not lose as much from a world without the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty as it will gain from a United States willing to cooperate."<sup>3</sup>

*Third*, the US and Russia agreed on 24 May 2002 to reduce the deployed nuclear arsenals on both sides by nearly two thirds - this despite long-held Russian objections to the US insistence that only deployed warheads be counted towards the total. But as in many negotiations between the countries, the US position prevailed. This agreement clearly indicated that disagreements over strategic arms would no longer impede progress in US-Russian relations. Though nuclear reduction advocates have been critical of this treaty because it does not require the dismantling of retired warheads and moreover envisages a ten-year time period for full treaty implementation, it is probably better than the absence of an agreement. The bilateral nuclear relationship between the two nations is taking a backseat to more pressing issues. This was perhaps best summarized by US Secretary of State Colin Powell who - alluding to a dispute, which had recently been reconciled, over a Russian import ban on American poultry - said: "I am more worried about chickens going back and forth than missiles going back and forth. This is good."

*Fourth*, on 14 May 2002 NATO further elaborated on previous attempts to engage Russia with the announcement of the NATO-Russia Council, a new measure to enhance co-operation on terrorism, arms control and international crisis management. Over the last decade, we have witnessed the creation of numerous NATO mechanisms (Partnership for Peace, the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, the Joint Permanent Council, the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council) that all have fallen short in their efforts to satisfy Russian desires to be considered an equal power in Europe. Whether this recent effort will actually amount to more than previous half-hearted attempts to assuage Russia by creating special mechanisms for Russian input into NATO still remains to be seen. But the new agreement, heralded by British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw as "the funeral of the Cold War," appears to offer Russia an equal role in discussions and actions on certain, limited issues with the 19 NATO member countries. NATO members will still maintain control over decisions regarding the use of force or membership in the Alliance. At best, Russia will still be a junior partner in the increasingly important Alliance. To underlie the shift in Russian thinking and their more pragmatic approach on NATO, Russian objections to NATO enlargement, even to the Baltic states, has been more muted than one would have predicted just a few years ago.

---

3 Celeste Wallander, Russia's Strategic Priorities, in: Arms Control Today, January/February 2002, p. 4.

There is an obvious pattern here. On each security issue, where there has been a disagreement between the United States and Russia, Russia has yielded to the United States on important points of international security. The evolution of the OSCE is a very powerful example of this. The Organization is much more a reflection of the US vision than it is of the Russian vision. This is true not only in terms of the overall role that the OSCE has in the European security architecture but also in the nature and shape of the Organization.

Though I refer to a new Russian pragmatism above, Russian acquiescence must also be seen as the reflection of a great power differential between the US and Russia. This pragmatism combined with Russian weakness has made for at least the appearance of more co-operative relations between the two former adversaries. One can indeed imagine an alternative scenario where Russian weakness, coupled with a non-pragmatic foreign policy, created intransigence in the Russian foreign policy elite that prevented the important agreements outlined above. Though there is some fear and evidence that the Russian foreign policy elite is out ahead of the public on this rapprochement with the United States, it is also true that foreign policy is not a particularly salient issue amongst the Russian masses today.

Of course, despite what I have described as a new Russian pragmatism, numerous points of contention do remain between the United States and Russia. And many of these are areas where the OSCE has a unique role. President Putin's support of the autocratic President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko has not gone over well with many in the West. And the Russians continually isolate themselves with defences of Lukashenko within the OSCE, where they successfully handcuffed the OSCE Mission to Belarus. The Russians have continued to fail to live up to its OSCE obligations to withdraw its 2,600 troops from Moldova. And in Georgia, Russia maintains thousands of troops and has failed to close the Russian military base Gudauta, located in Abkhaz territory. Here, the Russians have concerns about incursions by Chechen rebels.

#### *The Example of Chechnya*

It is in Chechnya that that the US and Russia have had major disagreements. Chechnya serves as an important example of the kinds of conflicts that have existed within the OSCE and continue to exist today. These disagreements have dissipated a bit in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the United States. Russian co-operation has given rise to the view that the United States might become less critical of the on-going conflict in Chechnya, closing a blind eye to Russian violations of OSCE norms and principles, perhaps recognizing that the Russian national interests justified its operations against "Chechen terrorists".

The OSCE role in Chechnya has been long and torturous. The OSCE Permanent Council agreed to the establishment of the OSCE Assistance Group to Chechnya in April of 1995. The OSCE played an important role in issues of traditional concern to the OSCE. It helped to broker ceasefires between the warring sides and helped to organize the presidential elections in Chechnya in 1997. As the only international organization present in Chechnya at the time, the OSCE took on tasks where it had considerable expertise and experience, particularly in the fields of human rights, post-conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction of the Chechen economy. However, the security situation on the ground forced the OSCE Assistance Group to withdraw from Chechnya to Moscow in December 1998. And Russia always had a contentious relationship with the Assistance Group, expressing serious disagreement in September of 1999 when the Assistance Group documented human rights violations against the Chechens and sent these to all OSCE delegations in Vienna.<sup>4</sup>

The OSCE Istanbul Summit in November of 1999 was dominated by the Russian military campaign in Chechnya. At the Summit, the then Russian President Boris Yeltsin argued: "You have no right to criticize Russia over Chechnya. We are standing up to a wave of terrorist acts which have swept through Moscow and other cities and villages of our country. 1,580 people - peaceful citizens - have suffered." Though the mandate of the Assistance Group was reaffirmed in Istanbul, the Russians were also insistent that the OSCE reaffirm Russian territorial integrity and condemn terrorism.

Further tensions within the OSCE over Chechnya were apparent at the end of 2000 when Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov resisted OSCE pressures. Ivanov vetoed a draft statement at the Vienna Ministerial Meeting that called for investigations into alleged crimes against Chechen civilians, the first time the Russians had vetoed an OSCE statement since the collapse of Communism. Further serious tensions arose when then OSCE Chairperson-in-Office Austrian Foreign Minister Benita Ferrero-Waldner criticized Russian actions in Chechnya in an official statement. The Russian delegation to the OSCE strongly condemned this action saying that it violated OSCE consensus rules. This prompted the delegation to urge the OSCE to reconsider the very way that the OSCE operated and the Chairman's right and ability to make statements in the name of the entire Organization. The US supported the Chairperson-in-Office. Much of the rhetoric surrounding this conflict echoed Soviet statements at the CSCE in the 1970s and 1980s when they complained that the Conference had a human rights double standard, only criticizing alleged human rights violations in the Soviet sphere of influence while ignoring alleged violations in the West. In addition, OSCE criticisms of Russian actions in Chechnya prompted the Russians to raise the issues of Northern Ireland, Corsica and Cyprus within the OSCE's Permanent Council.

---

4 Cf. Diederik Lohman, The international community fails to monitor Chechnya abuses, in: Helsinki Monitor 3/2000 pp. 73-82.

The logjam was broken as part of the new spirit of co-operation between the United States and Russia when the OSCE Chairman in Office in 2001, Romanian Foreign Minister Mircea Geoană, announced the official opening of the OSCE Assistance Group office in Znamenskoye (northern Chechnya) under the leadership of Romanian Ambassador Alexandru Cornea (followed by Finnish Ambassador Jorma Inki in February 2002). But even this breakthrough was not without controversy, as some Western nations complained that the agreement called for the funding of a 25-man Russian Justice Ministry protection force. This led some to question the freedom and of the Assistance Group to fulfil its OSCE mandate.

Of course, after September 11 the OSCE's reach into Central Asia became more salient than it had previously been. The Central Asian states have had a long held concern with Islamic terrorism and the Taliban. But there is a broader issue at hand here as well. September 11 made it clear that stability in the Central Asian states was of paramount importance to the United States, and a renewed US commitment to the region is evident. However, there are those who feel that this new commitment will cause the United States to ignore the region's lack of compliance with important OSCE human rights principles. Some fear that September 11 may result in the weakening of international support for human rights, democracy, freedom of the media and other important OSCE principles.<sup>5</sup> In this context, the Russians have also expressed concern over the closing of the OSCE Missions to Latvia and Estonia, urging that other OSCE mechanisms such as the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities remain engaged in minority rights issues in these Baltic states. This led to Russian reluctance to approve the OSCE's 2002 budget.

#### *Discrepancies between Resources and Reality*

While the OSCE has grown in profile and its mission has grown increasingly challenging and complex, the Organization frequently lacks the resources it needs to fulfil its growing role in conflict prevention. The United States, partially because of its obsession with NATO and its enlargement, and partially because OSCE is the forum favoured by Russia to deal with European problems, often resisted strengthening the OSCE. It is thus particularly ironic that Richard Holbrooke, former US Assistant Secretary of State, who had resisted attempts to strengthen the OSCE, designed agreements in both Bosnia and Kosovo that greatly expanded the OSCE's roles and responsibilities. The United States has always insisted on keeping the OSCE's Vienna Secretariat as small as possible, favouring instead the establishment of long-term missions. Some have suggested that this is the best way for the US to control the

---

5 This view is expressed, for example, by Arie Bloed, *The OSCE and the war against terror*, in: *Helsinki Monitor* 4/2001, p. 315.

OSCE, since a 55 member international organization operating on the principle of unanimity is hard to control, even for a superpower like the United States. Instead, it often had former US foreign service officers appointed as head of the most important OSCE missions in the field as a way of controlling important OSCE missions.

The OSCE is still a small organization by the standards of the United Nations and NATO, and has sometimes had to struggle to keep up with the increased role it has been asked to play in Europe. An example of this came when the world breathed a collective sigh of relief in the autumn of 1998 when it was announced that US envoy Richard Holbrooke forced an agreement with the then Yugoslavian President Slobodan Milosevic that might end the on-going violence in Kosovo. The agreement appeared to have come about from a combination of the threat of military action by NATO and the use of the OSCE to monitor the agreement. Clearly NATO, as the world's most powerful military alliance, had the means and know-how to inflict significant damage on the Serbs. What remained to be seen was whether the OSCE could really monitor the agreement - that is, deploy a 2,000-person monitoring mission in a timely and effective fashion. According to the then OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Polish Foreign Minister Bronislaw Geremek, it was the most challenging mission in the Organization's 23-year history. When Holbrooke was asked in an interview where the 2,000 people would come from, he said: "Anyone who wants to sign up should send their application to Vienna." In fact, the OSCE never reached full strength in Kosovo.

It was indeed the OSCE's struggle to fulfil this mandate that led the Organization to begin to think about how it could more rapidly mobilize to fulfil assigned tasks. A US initiative was accepted at the Istanbul Summit to set up Rapid Expert Assistance and Co-operation Teams (REACT). REACT is a database that lists experts who would theoretically be prepared to be deployed in field missions on short notice. It is hoped that the new Operation Centre will also help in the deployment and training of personnel for OSCE field activities. This will probably still not leave the OSCE as prepared to wage peace as NATO is to persecute a war, and thus it is still worth asking why the great powers are so much better prepared to wage war rather than enforce peace.

### *The Future*

Many questions remain as the OSCE continues to grow and examine itself as it evolves. Questions concerning the role of the Secretary General vis-à-vis the Chairman-in-Office, how to improve the accountability of OSCE field operations (which account for nearly 85 per cent of the OSCE budget) to the Secretariat, and how to make more efficient the decision-making procedures of the OSCE continue to be explored. But I think, as mentioned earlier in this



essay, the more holistic questions of the role of the OSCE in the overall European security architecture are no longer as relevant as they were a decade ago, or perhaps even five years ago. The enlargement of NATO and the EU go forward, providing the institutional framework for pan-European security that some thought should have been reserved for the OSCE. Realists and most idealists no longer argue about this today.

Few would have predicted in 1975, or 1990, what the OSCE would look like in the spring of 2002. Many difficult tasks no doubt lie ahead. For example, on 16 March 2001 the OSCE opened a new Mission to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. It is probably fair to say that few can predict what the OSCE will look like ten years from now. It is this flexibility that has been its biggest strength, and will continue to be so as future security issues in Europe emerge. The OSCE will, in all likelihood, remain what it is, an important, diverse and comprehensive security organization with an all-European membership and a close connection to issues of democratization, human rights and military security. And the United States will remain the ultimate guarantor of peace in Europe, with continued reliance on the expanding and broadening NATO Alliance.