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The USA and the OSCE: Still a Morganatic Union

Over the past two years, the relationship between the United States and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe has remained close, but not publicly celebrated. Like most other OSCE participating States, whether large or small, the United States has given priority attention to some other organization concerned with security and co-operation in Europe. OSCE has come second. In the case of the US, of course, this priority organization is NATO. For American officialdom, and for the American Congress, the current absorption with the enlargement of NATO has placed the OSCE still further in obscurity.

The speech given by Vice President Albert Gore at the Lisbon OSCE Summit in December 1996 struck the authentic themes of the United States position towards OSCE: It is useful, the Vice President said, that OSCE is developing rapidly and flexibly. But OSCE should not receive primacy as the "sole orchestrating element of European security". Moreover, OSCE should not be pressed into a treaty framework (as France, Germany, Russia and others still sometimes urge).

OSCE received prominent mention in the communiqué of the March 1997 meeting in Helsinki between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin. The two presidents agreed that the evolution of European security structures should be based on the principles of the OSCE and that "strengthening the OSCE (...) meets the interests of the United States and Russia". The two presidents pledged to enhance "the operational capability of the OSCE as the only framework for European security cooperation providing for full and equal participation of all states". Both presidents pledged their co-operation to the further development of the Comprehensive Security Model for the 21st Century, the Russian proposal on which OSCE has been working in a desultory way for over two years.

This degree of attention to OSCE in a bilateral communiqué between the United States and another country is unusual. It evidences an energetic United States effort to meet - or to appear to meet - Russia's frequently expressed interest in strengthening the OSCE, an interest pursued by Russia in an unfortunately episodic way without consistent follow-through. For the United States, the unusual prominence assigned to OSCE in the Helsinki communiqué was part of the vigorous effort to bring President Yeltsin to acquiesce in at least the first stage of NATO enlargement. With this in mind, at Helsinki, the United States paid tribute to OSCE, extended the period of implementation of START II, conceded further nuclear cuts in START III, and

indicated flexibility in amending the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe to hold down NATO forces and also the forces of newly admitted NATO member states.

But the United States has given no indication at the Helsinki meeting, at the Lisbon OSCE Summit, or in day to day dealings in the OSCE Permanent Council in Vienna, of any intention to seriously use OSCE discussion of a Common Security Model for the 21st Century as an occasion for major changes in the structure of European security - "European security architecture", as American officials often called it in the early and mid-nineties - to make that structure more genuinely pan-European or to build the OSCE itself into an overarching security organization for Europe, bringing together the United States and Canada and the EU countries with Eastern Europe, Russia and the other successor states of the former Soviet Union. Clearly, in the United States view, that pan-European function is to be taken over by a steadily expanding NATO, supplemented by the Partnership for Peace and special charters with Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and others.

The United States is co-operating in the work in the OSCE on a Common and Comprehensive Security Model for Europe for the Twenty-first Century. But in their unspoken thoughts, American officials see the ideal OSCE of the twenty-first century as precisely the same as they see the OSCE of today: a low profile, low-cost, workaday way of organizing intergovernmental co-operation in Europe, mainly for conflict prevention and management and for transmitting Western experience and values on human rights and democratic institutions to countries formerly members of the Warsaw Pact or parts of the Soviet Union.

Consequently, from the US viewpoint, the Common Security Model for the 21st Century should consist not of major structural or organizational changes upgrading the OSCE, but instead, of a ceremonial repackaging of already-existing OSCE agreements (such repackaging is a favourite OSCE practice). It appears likely that much of the final content of the "Model" and of the Charter on European Security, a further similar Russian initiative that the US has agreed to back, has already been laid out in OSCE's Lisbon Declaration of December 1996.

This includes: improving compliance with OSCE decisions; enhancing instruments of co-operative action in the event of non-compliance with OSCE commitments - here, some expansion of "consensus minus one" may be involved; improved co-operation between OSCE and other European security organizations; and refining the agreed measures and procedures for advancing OSCE's work in conflict prevention. One thought in this last context is travelling "democracy teams", that can group experts in many areas of democratic practice and bring these teams for sometimes protracted stays into major cities of the Eastern participating States.

Thus the real United States interest is not in organization-building; it is in putting the existing OSCE to work. To say that OSCE plays a secondary role in US policy does not at all mean that the role is an inactive one. Even more than in the past, the US has joined others in energetically heaping new functions and responsibilities on the OSCE, this time in Bosnia and most recently in Albania.

The United States, which took the initiative in pushing through a political and military armistice in Bosnia through the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Dayton Accords) of December 1995, also took the initiative in loading new responsibilities on OSCE for implementing this agreement, including confidence-building, arms control, and free elections, and some responsibility for human rights. These amount to many of the aspects of a peace settlement aside from the role of IFOR in preventing the recurrence of fighting. The OSCE has been much criticized by IFOR officers for alleged inefficiency in carrying out these functions. But IFOR itself has by far the easier role in implementing Dayton. Moreover, other than forming a completely new organization to carry out Dayton, there was no real choice of organization other than OSCE, given the fact that the UN had earned a bad reputation in Bosnia.

The significance of the US investment in implementing the Dayton Accords was underlined by the appointment of Ambassador Robert Frowick, a former American foreign service officer, as Head of the OSCE Mission and by the fact that Americans filled about 20 per cent of the roughly 270 OSCE positions in Bosnia.

After certification by the OSCE that minimum conditions for free elections had been achieved, nation-wide elections were held in Bosnia and Herzegovina in September 1996. The United States "Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe" (composed of nine members of the Senate, nine members of the US House of Representatives, and three senior administration officials) declared that "the elections cannot be considered free and fair" because of insufficient freedom of movement, association and expression - especially for refugees and expellees - and "were held prematurely because of limited international support for existing peacekeeping burdens"¹, i.e., because of the feared imminent departure of IFOR before it was replaced by the smaller follow-on SFOR.

Mainly because of the slowness in repatriating refugees and expellees, municipal elections in Bosnia have already been postponed three times - to November 1996, then to spring 1997, and most recently to autumn 1997.

¹ Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 234 Ford Office Building, Washington, DC 20515, "The September 1996 Elections in Bosnia-Herzegovina," Washington, September 26, 1996.

After a slow start, OSCE has also encountered difficulties in implementing the arms control provisions of the Dayton Accords. Data exchange on arms holdings has been delayed and incomplete. Individual Bosniacs now receiving arms and military training from the USA as well as some Bosnian Serbs have said they were looking forward to renewed and decisive military conflict. The war crimes issue in Bosnia remains largely unresolved, and economic reconstruction aid has been slowed by the very slow progress of repatriation and also by political obstruction, mainly from the Bosnian Serbs. Things are not going well in Bosnia. In a visit to Washington and other capitals in March 1997, President Izetbegovic warned of the consequences of slow progress.

In early March, a few members of Congress introduced a resolution calling for withdrawal of American forces from Bosnia during 1997, which caused Secretary of Defense William Cohen to insist that all US forces would in fact be withdrawn by mid-1998 though not earlier. British Foreign Minister Malcolm Rifkind repeated what he had been saying from the outset of NATO involvement in Bosnia - if US forces were withdrawn, European NATO forces would leave Bosnia the same day.

It is obvious that there remain very serious difficulties in the way of the Bosnia peace process. There is some risk here that the US administration will gradually disengage from its leading responsibility for the peace process and, seeking a scapegoat, turn on the OSCE, as the United States turned on the UN as a scapegoat for its own errors in Somalia and again during the period of US abstention from military involvement in Bosnia.

But for the moment, the US remains engaged in Bosnia and, with other participating States, is finding new and difficult tasks for the OSCE - in December 1996 and January 1997, OSCE missions were sent to Belgrade to convince President Milosevic of Serbia to retract his efforts to falsify municipal election results. Following on weeks of courageous public demonstrations by citizens of Belgrade, the missions had some success. In March 1997, the US backed a new OSCE mission to Albania parallel to a UN peacekeeping mission. Its main job was to install a temporary government and to arrange for new nation-wide elections.

The OSCE operation in Bosnia and probably that in Albania are far bigger than the small conflict prevention teams on which the OSCE has focused since its original failure in 1991 to make real progress in ending the fighting between Croats and Serbs in Croatia. The OSCE is not likely to undertake bigger tasks than these. Clearly, its success in these missions will be very important for its own future and for its future reputation.

On a day to day organizational basis, the OSCE is, with US support, making some progress. The annual budget in early 1997 was up to about 140 million US-Dollars from half that the previous year, and permanent personnel rose to

124 from a handful in 1994. Decision-making in the Permanent Council has become more effective without alienating any participating State's government. Open-ended working groups on a very wide variety of subjects have made it possible for the newer democracies of the East to get a hearing and worthwhile advice in areas of interest to them.

On the negative side, US support for OSCE criticism of inadequate human rights performance by some of these states was somewhat more muted than it has been in the past, more frequently subordinated to considerations of bilateral political relationships. The leading example is how the OSCE - with US backing - did constructive work in Chechnya by deliberately holding back on public criticism of egregious Russian conduct. It will be for history to draw the balance here. On the personnel front, the sequence of insightful, institution-building senior American officials that have contributed so much to OSCE was coming to an end with the pending departure of Assistant Secretary John Kornblum from the State Department. Difficulties in OSCE relationships with NATO have improved in the course of the Bosnian experience, but difficulties remain here, and also in OSCE relations with the EU, Western European Union and Council of Europe.

Although American public and political opinion remains largely oblivious to the existence of OSCE and its activities, among United States officials there has been increasing awareness of the increasing value and capability of OSCE. Full OSCE success in Bosnia would probably be beyond the capacity of a much stronger organization, but even modest success will enhance OSCE's reputation and support. From the practical viewpoint, the question is whether the United States, while piling new tasks on the OSCE, will in coming years be prepared to support giving the OSCE the additional human and financial resources it needs in order to carry out these new functions.