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Co-operative Security in 21st Century Europe: A Diplomatic Caucus Race?

At the time of writing, there are six weeks to go until the UK referendum on membership of the EU. This gives the reader the advantage of over me in assessing “domestic developments”. Whatever the outcome, the UK’s strong commitment to multilateral diplomacy and the rules-based international order of which the OSCE is a part will remain.

The unresolved legal status of the OSCE does not in any way diminish our commitment to the OSCE or its principles and commitments, dating back to Helsinki in 1975 and extending through Paris, Istanbul, and Astana to the present day. These OSCE principles and commitments and the fundamental freedoms they are designed to promote and protect are among our highest priorities at the OSCE. Indeed we would like to see them strengthened, for instance where they fall short of agreements reached at the UN, and updated.

But we see ourselves as a country not only of principles but also of practicality. We believe that what we do in international organizations and multilateral diplomacy should make a difference in the “real world”. Which is why you will often hear me or members of my UK Delegation calling for better evaluation procedures or asking what difference has been made by a project or activity. This is important in the OSCE, where our shared concept of comprehensive security relies upon a “multidimensional” approach to promoting stability and reducing the risk of conflict and instability. We need constantly to check that in an environment of shifting security threats and limited resources everything we do not only upholds our principles and commitments but also helps deliver sustainable stability and security.

25 Years of the OSCE ...

The OSCE, its commitments, and challenges have run like a thread through my diplomatic career so far. I have worked exclusively in the OSCE region, and almost entirely on issues in the OSCE’s three dimensions or “baskets”. Many of the questions that demand my attention now as Head of the UK Delegation to the OSCE also occupied me during my first posting to the Soviet Union from 1988 to 1992. Back then I travelled in the Baltic States, Ukraine, and the Caucasus, met Moscow advocates of human rights and religious freedom, read about the Crimean Tatars, and reported inter-ethnic conflict in the Ferghana Valley, to give just a few examples. Nagorno-

Note: The views contained in this contribution are the author’s own.

Karabakh, lately again in the world's headlines, was a particular preoccupation for the first few months.

Subsequently, living and working in Vilnius, The Hague, Moscow again, and Prague brought me into contact with conflict in the Balkans, through the work of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, as well as the legacy of communism and the Iron Curtain. In between, in London, I also worked on what the OSCE would refer to as transnational threats, primarily international terrorism.

As a young diplomat in the optimistic early 1990s, I might have looked forward twenty years imagining that with old strategic challenges behind us, the Helsinki spirit of co-operative security would have brought resolution to local conflicts and a genuinely co-operative approach to the implementation of OSCE commitments and principles. But as so often in life, the reality has proved much messier, with events evolving in a way that very few predicted.

... to the Present Day

Why, after twenty five years' investment of political and diplomatic capital in an institution designed to build co-operative security through "confidence-and security-building" and dialogue, is it now harder to achieve understanding and productive engagement than at any time since the dismantling of the physical barriers that divided us?

The OSCE (and the CSCE before it) has been both witness to and sometime participant in the intervening events and processes that have shaped our political and security environment; but it has rarely driven events. Over the intervening years, some participating States have questioned the value of the OSCE and of devoting national resources to it.

The UK approach has been to promote the effectiveness and relevance of the OSCE from within, including retaining a dedicated, full time delegation in Vienna. Perhaps the reason lies in the centrality of fundamental freedoms to our model of liberal democracy, our deep commitment to repairing the damage done by the Iron Curtain, and conceivably also our instinctive preference for practical ways to reduce risk of conflict.

It would be an exaggeration to suggest that the UK has for all this time seen the OSCE as the foremost guarantor of our peace and security. Although well known in diplomatic and foreign policy circles, the OSCE rarely features prominently in the public eye in the UK. Unlike the UN, the EU, and NATO, it is not a household acronym.

Changed Perceptions

Ironically, it was the point that some might argue epitomized the shortcomings of the OSCE – the onset of the crisis “in and around Ukraine” and Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea, violating almost every rule in the OSCE book – that brought the institution to greater prominence.

Ukraine has changed perceptions of the relevance and value of the OSCE. Understanding of the OSCE, its nature, and limitations has not always kept pace with its increased political and media profile. All of us who work in or with the OSCE share a responsibility to improve understanding of the Organization, its possibilities, and its limitations.

Changed Responses

Since the start of the Ukraine crisis, the OSCE has risen in prominence in the thinking of UK policy makers. As well as devoting attention and resources to political, conflict-management, and humanitarian aspects of the crisis, we have made substantial financial contributions to other high-priority OSCE activities and reinstated a full time Senior Military Adviser to the UK Delegation.

The UK contributes around ten per cent of the OSCE’s unified budget, including a higher proportion towards field missions. In 2015-2016 we paid over seven million pounds towards the costs of the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine. In addition, we allocated significant further funding for extra-budgetary activities, including demining in eastern Ukraine to protect children and other non-combatants and safer storage of weapons in Bosnia.

We are constantly looking for ways to help increase impact and effectiveness so that the political and financial investment of the UK and the other 56 participating States brings the greatest possible benefit for security and stability in the OSCE region. We have a deserved reputation for taking a tough approach to organizational efficiency. We want to see resources appropriately allocated and well managed, with results tracked and evaluated accountably. We will continue to do this because we believe it important for the effectiveness and reputation of the OSCE. In the same way, we will continue to push hard for the OSCE to remain focused on the highest priority issues and risks to the region’s stability and security, and to concentrate effort where it can add the most value.

Changed Reality?

Perceptions are one thing, but reality is changed beyond the walls of the Hofburg. The Russian Federation’s illegal annexation of Crimea and military

aggression in the Donbas not only created a rupture within the OSCE but had other significant consequences, such as the suspension of NATO dialogue with Moscow, EU economic sanctions and Russian countermeasures, and the effective expulsion of Russia from the G8. Propaganda from the Kremlin that attempts to misinform and mislead on a massive scale has also played a major part in increasing mistrust between a Russian population heavily reliant upon state-controlled media and an outside world increasingly sceptical of what Moscow says.

The crisis “in and around Ukraine” may be a symptom rather than the cause of the state of relations between Russia and its Western neighbours, but Russian actions in Crimea and the Donbas have precipitated a change in reality that leaves Moscow isolated diplomatically and heightens the risk of military miscalculation. In his introduction to the report of the Panel of Eminent Persons (see below), Wolfgang Ischinger, Chairman of the Munich Security Conference, who presided over the panel, wrote that implementation of the Minsk agreements to resolve the Ukraine crisis was “the most urgent diplomatic task of all”.

The Problem of “Dialogue”

“Renewing dialogue, rebuilding trust, restoring security” is the admirable, if ambitious, motto of the 2016 German OSCE Chairmanship. Others echo Germany’s aspiration:

“Dialogue is good but needs to tackle the tough issues of our time.”¹

“Dialogue on questions of immense importance to all human civilization [...]”²

“[...] we should seize every opportunity for genuine dialogue, based on good faith and political will”.³

The OSCE is indeed the place where the spotlight can be kept on our most difficult regional security issues. Week in week out, EU member states, the US, Canada, and others, including Ukraine itself, exchange views with Russia in the formal, semi-public setting of the Permanent Council and other forums on the situation in and around Ukraine.

The Permanent Council finds itself on the front line of a war of words. The prevailing language of this discourse challenges dialogue’s most ardent proponents. Myths and disinformation about military personnel, or “little

1 Ambassador Daniel B. Baer, *The Right Leadership at a Difficult Time*, published in German as: *Wo Deutschland führen kann*, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 10 February 2016, p. 8, available at <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/sicherheitskonferenz/osze-vorsitz-wo-deutschland-fuehren-kann-14061049.html>.

2 Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin addressing the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, February 2016.

3 European Union, 62nd Joint Meeting of the Forum for Security Cooperation and the Permanent Council, Vienna, 9 March 2016, *EU Statement on European Security*, FSC-PC.DEL/1/16, 9 March 2016, at: <http://www.osce.org/fsc/227686>.

green men”, in Crimea, Russian military and sophisticated weaponry in the Donbas, the shooting down of MH17, and so on, repeated at the multilateral table and behind closed doors as well as in the public sphere, inhibit productive engagement.

The UK view is a rather practical one. Talking is important, but rarely an end in itself. Clear purpose and end goals are prerequisites for productive dialogue, lengthy pre-prepared statements are not.

Facilitating interactive dialogue “at 57” is a challenge German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier hopes to overcome with an innovative informal (“Gymnich” style) meeting of Foreign Ministers this autumn. I wish him every success in making progress on the “tough issues of the day”.

As a study by the OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions observed, “One cannot continue with a routine dialogue as if nothing had happened”.⁴

Is the OSCE Still Relevant?

Yes. The pursuit of a secure, stable environment across the whole OSCE region and on our borders remains a daily preoccupation for almost every participating State large or small. My top priorities as Head of the UK Delegation to the OSCE centre on conflict prevention and resolution, reduction of military risk, and protection of fundamental freedoms. The continued case for the OSCE in each of these areas is clear, whether because of the tragic situation in the Donbas, tensions elsewhere that bubble over into violence, military misunderstandings (and provocation), the shrinking space for civil society, or contemporary conundrums relating to freedom of speech.

OSCE principles and commitments built up from Helsinki, through Paris and Istanbul, and on to Astana remain as important and relevant as ever for safeguarding the rights and interests of individuals and communities. Our instruments for conventional arms control and CSBMs hold significant potential for early warning and conflict prevention if applied and fully implemented in letter and spirit. And the OSCE model of comprehensive security looks ever more essential in the face of non-conventional threats to security and stability. The challenge here is to ensure that we do not confuse an effective “comprehensive” approach with lack of focus.

How Is It Performing?

There can be little doubt about the continued relevance or our purpose as an organization. But it is right to ask questions about how well the OSCE and its

4 OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions, *Threat Perceptions in the OSCE Area*, Vienna 2014, p. 6.

57 participating States have risen to the challenge of changing dynamics, transnational threats, and protracted conflicts on our continent.

What has the OSCE achieved? Has it reduced or prevented conflict and instability? Are we responsible for perpetuating an unsatisfactory status quo?

No OSCE State can be fully satisfied. At no time in recent decades have we come close to the level of protection of human rights or prevention of conflict aspired to in the OSCE *acquis*. Those directly involved in long-running peace or mediation processes argue that without their involvement things would be worse. I will leave fuller analysis and assessment to scholars and historians. But from a diplomatic point of view, resolutions depend less upon new processes or impetus than the genuine political will of all those involved to reach sustainable solutions.

In the Western Balkans, the OSCE has had a more active “hands on” role in sustainable post-conflict reconciliation through sizeable field operations. I have seen some of the painstaking work they undertake and been impressed by their patience and commitment. But as elsewhere in the OSCE I believe there may be more we could do to ensure our resources and the efforts of our people result in the best possible contribution to sustainable stability.

During a recent Chatham House discussion on European Security,⁵ I heard eminent non-governmental experts argue that expectations of international institutions are too high. This might apply particularly to the OSCE, an organization built on principles and commitments.

There may always be some differing perspectives on OSCE priorities. But we have a common starting point in the undertakings made by all participating States. In pursuit of these, the UK looks to the OSCE to contribute to European security through practical action rather than new grand designs. The OSCE is about much more than the governments of its 57 participating States or the Vienna-based Permanent Council of ambassadors with its cat’s cradle of committees and working groups. We hold in high regard the contribution made by the Representative on Freedom of the Media, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, and the High Commissioner on National Minorities. But the OSCE is also more than its institutions and field operations. It is about a much wider and deeper network of peace builders, defenders of human rights and fair legal order, teachers, media professionals, politicians, local authorities, networks, and responsibilities that reach through civil society right across our region. It is vital that we always keep in sight the direct link between what we do in the Permanent Council and the reality for our citizens.

5 Chatham House conference “Security and Defence in Europe”, March 2016, London.

Understanding the Problem ...

What is seen by other OSCE States as an illegitimate and illegal attack on sovereignty and territorial integrity is presented through a Moscow prism as the creation or defence of a sphere of influence in the interests of national security. The “crisis in and around Ukraine”, like protracted conflicts elsewhere, appears to be considered by the Kremlin as unfinished business arising from the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union, an event famously described by President Vladimir Putin as a geopolitical catastrophe.

The OSCE, which developed in the optimism of the early 1990s, was not designed for the current turn of events. Notwithstanding perceptions of its enhanced value and relevance, it has been severely challenged by the illegal annexation of Crimea and, what is effectively armed conflict between two of the largest OSCE States. This in turn has led to the breakdown of already fragile trust and confidence within the OSCE, all but paralysing the diplomatic decision-making bodies of this consensus-based organization.

To give just two examples: Russia declines to engage on increasing military transparency and reducing risk by updating the Vienna Document. Russia blocked all nine candidates for the post of Representative on Freedom of the Media, asserting that none of the senior journalists, NGO experts, diplomats, and academics, was sufficiently “eminent”. Russian tactics are sometimes clearer than objectives.

... And Solving It – The only Way Is Helsinki

In 2014, and not for the first time, a Panel of Eminent Persons was recruited by the OSCE Chairmanship to address strategic issues around European Security and the OSCE. Chaired by Wolfgang Ischinger and tasked with considering “how Europe could reconsolidate its security as a common project [...] and to examine ways of re-launching the idea of co-operative security”, taking account of the “damage done by the crisis in and around Ukraine” and “the annexation of Crimea by force [...] an action unprecedented in post-war Europe”.⁶

Problems familiar from Viennese diplomatic discourse were replicated in the deliberations and final report of the Eminent Persons. They were unable to reach understanding on facts, analysis, or remedies. But it was striking that, having observed that “the vision of a ‘common European home’

6 *Back to Diplomacy. Final Report and Recommendations of the Panel of Eminent Persons on European Security as a Common Project*, November 2015, p. 5, at: <http://www.osce.org/networks/205846>; reprinted in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2015*, Baden-Baden 2016, pp. 377-408, here: p. 379.

may be more remote today than it appeared two decades ago”,⁷ they concluded that, although “violated in most damaging ways”, the Helsinki Principles remained “the only basis for a Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian space in which people and nations can live in peace”.⁸

Personal Observations: Diplomatic Caucus Race

In Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, a young child observes a collection of exotic creatures running around in a circle with no obvious finishing line or “objective” in sight, but prizes expected for all. Multilateral diplomacy in pursuit of co-operative twenty-first century security in Europe can have something of the same feel. It may not always be a great spectator sport, being short on direction and dynamism. But, as long as everyone understands and abides by the same rules, a peaceful equilibrium can be achieved with no harm, some individual reward for everyone and a shared benefit of stability and predictability. If, however, one or more participants disregard the rules they have signed up to in pursuit of individual aims counter to the interests and even rights of other participants, chaos or conflict ensues, stability is undermined and instead of winning prizes, perpetrator, victim, and third parties all have to pay costs. In international diplomacy it may be tempting to conclude that the rules are unfit for purpose, or even that rewarding the perpetrator offers the best outcome, a “solution” that would appear to be nonsensical even in Alice’s *Wonderland*.

In the real world of twenty-first century European security, preventing further immediate conflict and damage is only part of the challenge. A truly effective and sustainable role for the OSCE in the international rules-based order depends upon a high degree of trust and transparency. Restoring these is arguably the greater challenge, requiring political will and good faith. Or, as Alice and the March Hare might have put it, readiness to say what you mean and mean what you say, including in international undertakings. In the shorter term, pending more auspicious times, better understanding of respective interests and goals would help restore the delicate equilibrium of the diplomatic caucus race and allow some progress to be made.

Conclusions: Useful Endeavour?

Imperfect as it is, the OSCE has a role as a safety valve where views and opinions are exchanged and contacts maintained. This gives all concerned at least some insight into each other’s policies and objectives. Even in the absence of any means of enforcement or penalties for non-compliance, Vienna

7 Ibid., p. 12 (p. 384).

8 Ibid., p. 5 (pp. 379-380).

processes and mechanisms help keep human rights and fundamental freedoms on the regular international agenda – and still have potential to reduce risk of military accidents and incidents.

The OSCE is a consensus organization. It can only fulfil its potential if all 57 want it to. Without good faith and political will, the OSCE can never achieve its full potential. This is highly unlikely to be possible in the current circumstances. But we have a shared responsibility to make the best we can of these circumstances, acting in critical areas where there is existing agreement and common interest, and at the same time continuing to invest in the effectiveness of the Organization so it is ready as and when circumstances allow it to achieve its full intended purpose.

In the meantime, as far as strategic, geopolitical issues are concerned, we can continue to work for predictability if not confidence, and transparency if not trust. We can invest attention and energy in management of protracted and post-conflict situations and, where the OSCE can make a unique contribution, work on practical responses to action transnational challenges. We can support the autonomous institutions and the important contribution they can make to conflict prevention and early warning. Working to preserve a continuing level of engagement and activity, we should be ever alert to the risk that strategic patience becomes institutional inertia.

One obvious antidote to that risk is to make the OSCE as fit as possible for the present and the future. Future achievement and performance will be the sum of capability, effort, and ability to respond to external factors. Success will take: strong leadership based on political credibility, diplomatic skill and unswerving commitment to OSCE principles and commitments; political engagement – for which we all need to demonstrate to our governments the ability of the OSCE to make a difference; capable, efficient, and responsive executive capabilities; a shift of focus from process and activity to outcomes; honest evaluation, including of long-running peace processes; and a rigorous focus on the highest priority issues where the OSCE has a unique regional or expert contribution to make.

The OSCE matters. Its principles matter. Its relationships matter. If it did not already exist we would need to invent it. Its structures and procedures may be a bit messy. But if we tried to design a tidier solution we would soon find realities and interests – geographical, historical, and political – getting in the way. For all the OSCE's idiosyncrasies and frustrations it offers us the architecture and instruments to address current and future challenges. We must all hope and pray that, in time, renewed respect and their better use will help lead us back to a more certain path for co-operative security and stability in Europe.