

Therese Liechtenstein: Strengthening the OSCE

How can Liechtenstein, which does not have an army, contribute to the European security order? In fact, Liechtenstein is one of the founding members of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. The OSCE is a consensus-based organization, with all participating states enjoying equal status. Thus, large states like Russia are included in all decisions but also small countries like Liechtenstein.



OSCE origins:

What is the OSCE? It was originally created in the early 1970s as a confidence-building project between the East and the West. This series of multilateral negotiations culminated in the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975. This document was essentially a compromise, with the West achieving that the Soviet Union would agree to principles of self-determination and human rights in return for accepting the territorial status quo of Europe as of 1945. This document has become the basis of the European security order as we know it. What was so important about this was that the leaders of states with immensely different ideologies managed to engage in dialogue to prevent war. Later, the conference developed into an organisation which now consists of 57 participating states. They include the whole of Europe as well as states from the Eurasian and Euro-Atlantic regions.

After the end of the cold war, the OSCE lost much of its importance with the EU and NATO playing a larger role in European security. Russia joined the G7 (which became G8) and the Council of Europe. Also, the NATO-Russia Council was formed and there were frequent summits between Russia and the EU. So Russia did not need the OSCE anymore as a platform for dialogue. But when the Ukraine crisis escalated, Russia was suspended from the G7, the Council of Europe and relations to the EU and NATO are practically inexistent. Suddenly the OSCE is important again for the East-West dialogue.

Nevertheless, I would like to mention that the OSCE has always played an important role in what are called frozen conflicts. Due to their nature, these conflicts normally don't make the headlines. Thus the OSCE's important role hasn't reached the consciousness of the general public. But for participating states like Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova, the OSCE is still immensely important in order to provide a multilateral channel through which to manage their conflicts.

Role of the OSCE in the Ukraine crisis:

With the Ukraine crisis, the OSCE is facing several major challenges, such as Russia's violation of several OSCE principles, increasing tensions between its member states, and the near-impossibility of conducting missions on the ground.

However, the OSCE has some unique qualities, too. Its members include Ukraine and all its neighbors both from the EU and NATO and from the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) and CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization). As these organisations are considered biased, and the UN cannot act due to Moscow's blockade, the OSCE is the only impartial actor that can mediate between the parties

Several measures for conflict management have been implemented by the OSCE to alleviate the Ukraine conflict including electoral observation, protection of the freedom of media, confidence and security building measures, and national dialogue. The special monitoring mission (SMM) and the observer mission (OM) on two Russian checkpoints which enhance military transparency are the most prominent functions of the OSCE. I would like to emphasise the achievement of agreeing these monitoring missions within Ukraine as they needed a consensus of all OSCE states. This shows in fact that member states appreciate the value of this platform.

At Minsk II, further functions were accorded to the OSCE SMM, e.g. in observing the removal of heavy weapons. Unfortunately, the OSCE staff is not capable of monitoring an area as big as Switzerland with less than 500 people. Also, most regions in the conflict zone are so dangerous that the monitors either don't go there at all or only if accompanied by Eastern Ukrainian separatists. So it is often not possible for the OSCE to ascertain whether the measures agreed in Minsk II are being adhered to. Certainly, they are in no position to control whether arms are being delivered to

Eastern Ukraine by Russia. Still, the OSCE missions remain the only objective source of information we have on the ground.

While the OSCE's ability to fully observe the situation on the ground may be limited, the organisation is vital to the continued dialogue between all the parties that have a stake in the Ukraine crisis. The Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) set up by the Swiss OSCE chairmanship encompasses the representatives of Ukraine, the Russian Federation and the OSCE. Ambassador Heidi Tagliavini speaks perfect Russian and is accepted by the Eastern Ukrainian Separatists.

The TCG is the only framework for direct negotiations with the Eastern Ukrainian separatists. While it was portrayed in the media that the Normandy group (France, Germany, Ukraine, Russia) was instrumental to agreeing on Minsk II, this is only true in a limited fashion. In fact, the TCG was crucial for this agreement, which was signed by Ambassador Tagliavini and the representatives of the Ukraine, the Eastern Ukrainian separatists, and the Russian Federation.

What could be the conditions for a larger involvement of the OSCE?

1) Increased political will and resources

The OSCE was not prepared for such a large mission. In the end, its ability to act will always depend on the political will of its participating states, their ability to agree, and the resources they provide. In fact, the mandate for the SMM has already been prolonged until March 2016 and the number of monitors increased to 1000.

2) Refocusing on traditional Helsinki principles

From the mid-1990s there was a change in OSCE's key objectives. Strengthening of democracy and rule of law in post-Soviet countries became a main focus while the politico-military and economic-environmental dimensions were neglected. This is the reason why the OSCE is seen by many post-Soviet states as biased towards interference in their countries. But they still see it as the lesser evil, due to its inclusive and consensual nature. Thus it is the best-suited organization to mediate between the conflict parties and in the East-West conflict in general.

Now, the OSCE must decide whether to continue on its path of Western value-based activities within other countries. This would alienate members with authoritarian governments. Another option would be to return to its original Cold War objective of being a platform for inclusive co-operative security dialogue between all members, regardless of their political ideology. Nevertheless, one should not forget that Russia has signed several OSCE documents in which all participating states accepted these values. If you sign something you should stick to it – and Russia has not.

3) Strong and neutral leadership

As the OSCE is consensus-based, it needs leadership to ensure decisions get taken. We need the kind of leadership that we had back in 1975, putting ideological differences aside and engaging in dialogue to ensure security within Europe.

The chairmanship of the OSCE changes every year and in 2014, Switzerland held the chairmanship. The Chairperson-in-Office was thus Didier Burkhalter, the foreign minister and head of state of Switzerland who was highly engaged. For protocol reasons, having a head of state chairing the OSCE proved particularly useful in reaching out to President Vladimir Putin.

4) Stronger focus on the underlying East-West conflict rather than seeing each crisis as a separate event

While the Ukraine crisis has revived the importance of the OSCE, it needs a well-defined mission beyond Ukraine. The Ukraine crisis cannot and should not be seen as a singular event but rather as a symptom of the East-West conflict. With the currently steadily increasing hostility between Eastern and Western politicians, a platform is needed where issues can be discussed freely.

In summary, Russia's actions have shattered the European security architecture as we know it, and I believe that the OSCE would be the best platform to reconstruct it.

But I also believe that negotiations would be much easier if we followed President Theodore Roosevelt's foreign policy of: "Speak softly, and carry a big stick."