

CONSIDERING SECURITY AMIDST STRATEGIC CHANGE: THE OSCE EXPERIENCE

Craig G. Dunkerley

Ambassador Dunkerley is distinguished adjunct professor at the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies, National Defense University. The opinions are solely those of the author. They do not reflect policy or official assessments of the National Defense University or the U.S. government.

As a starting point for debate, I would offer a two-fold proposition:

- The dramatic events of the past year have made clear that the Gulf region is in the midst of substantial and perhaps accelerating strategic change, the scope and eventual implications of which are still to be determined.

- In considering how to stabilize and strengthen the resulting post-Saddam security environment within the region – even amidst such change – there will be a corresponding need for policy makers to think beyond traditional solutions.

It is to this latter end that some American and European commentators have suggested, among other things, that the recent experiences of other regions might serve as a rich source of ideas for possible application within the Middle East as a whole and in the Gulf specifically. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), with all of that body's related commitments and processes, is

frequently cited in this regard.¹

As one of the largest and most active regional security organizations in the world, the OSCE now comprises 55 participating states from all of Europe, most of North America and parts of Eurasia. The OSCE characterizes its approach to regional security as both comprehensive and cooperative:

- Comprehensive in that OSCE seeks to deal with an unusually wide range of security-related issues, including preventive diplomacy, political-military confidence- and security-building measures, arms control, human rights, democratization, election monitoring and steps to strengthen both economic and environmental security.

- Cooperative in the sense that OSCE is broadly inclusive in nature: it is not directed against any country; all participating states have equal status; and its decisions are based on consensus.²

In turn, this interest in drawing upon some variant of the OSCE experience in thinking about future security arrangements within the Gulf appears to be based on

three major premises. First, the emergence of a post-Saddam Iraq less threatening to its neighbors – however necessary and important that prospect might be – will not, by itself, be sufficient either to promote more cooperative relations among all of the actors currently in the Gulf or to ensure a more secure and stable peace throughout the region as whole. Indeed, relative Iraqi vulnerability over the next few years may be a new and destabilizing factor.

Second, it remains true that existing free-standing diplomatic and defense efforts (chiefly bilateral ties) will continue to be the central method of resolving current security concerns, adapting to change in past political-military patterns, and deterring future threats within the Gulf region. However, these longstanding bilateral ties might be usefully complemented with expanded dialogue and cooperative mechanisms designed to promote greater mutual confidence and reciprocal political reassurance in the face of longstanding differences, local suspicions and memories of past conflict.

Third, a critical question will be how effectively popular aspirations, to be found throughout the region, are satisfied for the greater exercise of democratic rights and freedoms, for good governance and individual dignity within societies, and for expanded economic opportunity in the face of both globalization and demographic challenges. This future internal development of Gulf polities will be no less important for longer-term stability and security throughout the region than more traditional worries over borders and narrower political-military calculations.

Those commentators who use a shorthand reference to OSCE's possible relevance for the Gulf would also hasten to

make clear what they are *not* proposing. All will readily confirm the far-reaching differences among various regions of the world and their recent histories. With perhaps one or two exceptions, most would also deny that they are suggesting any automatic replication of institutions like the OSCE, let alone the wholesale importation of such organizations into the Gulf. Most would agree that, to be meaningful, any interest in enhanced regional dialogue and possible cooperative mechanisms would have to spring primarily from the parties in the region itself. These ideas cannot be imposed by external sources alone. They would emphasize that OSCE-like arrangements would, by themselves, be neither a panacea nor a comprehensive solution for all of the security concerns of the Gulf. Rather, any such steps would have to be seen as parts of a much larger and complex whole. In the words of one analyst, they would be "a network of interlinked arrangements and relationships rather than a single overarching structure or even a fixed array of formal organizations."³ Some would go on to stress the need for a very long-term perspective on any such projects; no quick results could be expected.

These are some of the many caveats and conditions attached to this idea. In most instances, however, this process of brainstorming has not yet gone on to spell out more precisely the practical lessons that the OSCE experience might provide for policy makers and the operational implications that might follow.⁴

OSCE AND REGIONAL SECURITY

The various details of the OSCE's organizational evolution over the years may prove to be much less important than the political insights that might be gleaned from

a consideration of the OSCE experience with its missed opportunities. This might offer useful lessons on two fundamental questions:

- How to sustain a meaningful regional dialogue on cooperative security in the face of significantly differing interests and expectations among its potential participants, especially when the diplomatic field is littered with past disappointments.
- How to use such regional arrangements as one means (presumably out of several) of buffering and managing the longer-term political and security challenges posed by substantial and ongoing change in the region's overall strategic environment.

As an experiment in advancing regional security and cooperation, the OSCE ensured its relevance not by papering over the serious differences originally existing among its participating states, but rather by providing both basic principles and a standing process through which its participants could regularly review the practical implications of those differences. As an organization, OSCE retained a politically based flexibility that enabled it to evolve radically to meet new circumstances and new needs of its participants.

We too easily forget just how deeply divided Europe was not too long ago. OSCE's foundation – the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 – was seen by many at the time as a political set-piece largely to reconfirm certain post-war borders in the middle of a continent still divided by deep political differences, intense ideological competition and a very real risk of military conflict.

This negotiating process at Helsinki of what became first the CSCE (Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe)

and subsequently the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) laid out certain basic principles of behavior by all of its participating governments – towards both other states and their own peoples.⁵ In substance, much of this was not overly different from other multilateral charters and agreements arrived at in the U.N. context. But in establishing review mechanisms and what became extensive follow-up, the Helsinki process reflected a built-in assumption of profound differences among its participants. In that sense, the OSCE phenomenon was different from Europe's experience with either NATO or the EU, all of whose members were presumed to share a basic set of common interests from the very start.

In this way, the OSCE was able to escape the fate of too many summit-level initiatives: high-sounding commitments announced in communiqués that quickly fell into disuse and political neglect. By providing for the regular review and frank discussion of the status of all of its participants' implementation of their Helsinki commitments, the OSCE generated many lively, heated exchanges – and it still does, as the latest OSCE Ministerial in Maastricht has demonstrated. But, paradoxically, this focus on constant review ensured that participating states increasingly had to take these OSCE discussions seriously. Further, over time, a number of smaller states came to see the OSCE as a useful vehicle by which they could air their own special security concerns and flag emerging problems in their immediate region. This gave, in effect, a political early-warning function to OSCE.

In its philosophy and practice, the OSCE process was designed to reaffirm an equal status and legitimacy for each of its

participants and their respective security concerns, thus reinforcing a sense of stability to the overall system of European security. But, as events played out, the OSCE did not represent a frozen state of European affairs, nor was it meant to reinforce a totally static environment. On the contrary, a recurring emphasis on Helsinki's basic principles provided for and actively encouraged processes of peaceful and positive change, both among states and, no less important, within their societies.

A special contribution of OSCE was thus to legitimize a wide-ranging regional discussion of what actually constitutes security. From early on, the Helsinki Final Act process came to assert a comprehensive definition of European security: namely, the notion that a secure and stable peace throughout Europe would depend not just on how states acted towards each other but on how their governments interacted with their own peoples. The OSCE provided both a multilateral framework and a supportive political culture in which such issues could be discussed as the legitimate concern of countries of the region as a whole.

Paralleling the dramatic changes in East-West relations from 1989 onward, this Helsinki process came to evolve into the OSCE of today, a regional institution no longer based on a Europe sharply divided, but rather a valuable post-Cold War institution with a new operational emphasis on joint efforts in democracy-building, conflict prevention and post-conflict rehabilitation.⁶ As an institution, OSCE did not become obsolete because it remained politically based, was relatively light in its bureaucratic structure, and was able to perform some regional tasks with much less difficulty and expense than other

organizations, such as the United Nations. With a relatively low public profile, it enjoyed a certain freedom to experiment with new tasks and, on occasion, even to fail without great repercussion.

In this regard, it is important not to forget the trial-and-error aspect of cooperative multilateral approaches to regional security. For instance, European and American policy makers developed, only after some fits and starts, a realistic sense of what an institution like OSCE could, and could not, best contribute. As constituted, OSCE could not provide hard security against threats of aggression or intimidation through its own military guarantees or collective defense arrangements. But what it could offer was an important security supplement: a uniquely all-inclusive process by which mutual confidence building and reciprocal reassurance could help to lessen the political likelihood of any such threats arising.

OSCE's relevance and its instances of success in overcoming specific barriers to East-West cooperation were made possible only by an equilibrium of power, the effective deterrence of threats, and a resulting stable peace in Europe. This security environment was made possible, through some very difficult periods, only by the durability of other regional relationships and institutions, notably NATO in ensuring the peace and the EU in expanding political and economic cooperation.

Thus the contribution of OSCE to the notion of cooperative security within Europe could not be divorced from these other key institutions. Despite occasional half-hearted mutterings out of Moscow (and periodic qualms among some in Washington), the OSCE never represented a serious attempt to replace existing

alliance structures or other security relationships. And by the late 1990s, there was the growing possibility for Eastern states to integrate into these very groups at the core of the West, NATO and the EU.

The Helsinki process and the resulting OSCE were neither intended nor structured to deal by themselves with the most serious military challenges during the great East-West differences of the Cold War: namely, the risk of sudden attack by large conventional armored forces forward-deployed in the heart of Europe and the attendant threat of early nuclear escalation. But what OSCE could provide policy makers was a different sort of security tool: a relatively unique forum for substantive discussion, and in some cases negotiation, on various European security problems in a broad multilateral context that was not based on any group membership or affiliation.

Over time, OSCE also became an instrument for managing the effects of strategic change. As the European landscape began to change radically with the fall of the Berlin Wall, OSCE's role as the only all-inclusive European body dealing with security issues, however "soft" in nature, came to be seen as a special political asset. On the one hand, OSCE's trans-Atlantic nature recognized the indispensable contribution that the United States brought to security and peace in Europe. On the other hand, its pan-European cast made clear that all states should have a legitimate and equal seat at the table. This latter aspect of OSCE proved to be particularly useful in the political management and reassurance of those states most affected by drastic strategic change with the break-up of the Soviet Union: a potentially isolated Russia

and its anxious smaller neighbors.⁷

This leads to a third observation about the specifics of OSCE's role in confidence building and reassurance: OSCE's agenda has been such that European and American policy makers have been able to balance this broad political discussion of "comprehensive and cooperative security" with a much narrower and practical focus on those measures that could bring greater transparency and predictability to regional military affairs. In this long-term process, OSCE's most important contribution to reciprocal reassurance has rested with its provisions for extensive verification, confirmation and accountability.

The sorts of political-military confidence-and security-building measures (CSBMs) that the OSCE made possible throughout Europe have involved the following:

- Regular exchange of basic information on the national forces of participating states, their major weapons systems and their deployments;
- Periodic opportunities for participating states to explain and discuss their respective national-defense policies and doctrines;
- Pre-notification of planned military exercises and opportunities for the mutual observation of such events;
- Mechanisms for multilateral consultation on the occasion of unusual military activities;
- Dedicated communication links to exchange such information among participants in a secure and private manner;
- Regular meetings to discuss questions that have arisen about implementation practices.⁸

The substance of these OSCE measures was not unique. Variants of such

political-military confidence-building tools can be found elsewhere. They were discussed extensively in the Middle East Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) effort in the mid-1990s. In recent years, various confidence-building measures have been explored in the Gulf region as well.⁹

Similarly, India and Pakistan have agreed at various times to pursue comparable measures. This instance is of special note because it also illustrates one of the problems of such confidence-building efforts. In the case of India and Pakistan, a lack of full and consistent implementation of these measures, together with imperfect follow-up communication between the two parties, has often tended to generate suspicion and, perversely, to diminish mutual confidence.¹⁰

The participants in the OSCE process sought to address this particular challenge by providing for a standing venue requiring regular follow-up discussion in a largely non-politicized and supportive multilateral context. Over time, these discussions have lent themselves to the negotiation of new measures. Many of these have moved beyond the original military concerns to deal increasingly with less traditional emerging threats to common security. For example, the most recent OSCE Annual Security Review Conference dealt with the security problems that international terrorism poses for all countries – focused on new measures for conventional ammunition-stockpile security and destruction, enhanced export controls on man-portable air-defense systems, and steps for greater security in travel documents.¹¹

A smaller number of OSCE participants also negotiated and subsequently updated the Conventional Armed Forces in

Europe (CFE) Treaty regime. This long-term effort established a structure of stable, predictable and verifiable numerical limits on the conventional ground and air equipment holdings of the largest European militaries. Even with subsequent political changes throughout Europe, CFE continues to govern those military levels and deployments within Europe. The resulting levels of U.S. and NATO ground and air forces thus came to be inversely proportional to the political progress Europe had achieved in overcoming its past Cold War divisions.¹²

APPLICATIONS; IMPLICATIONS

What might all this OSCE history mean for policy makers in the Gulf? It is not, of course, that the fundamental idea of building upon past and current relationships among the societies and economies of this region is somehow a new one. Neither is the notion of encouraging bilateral or multilateral dialogue on security issues of common concern. In some cases, that process may already be under way. As noted, in recent years various confidence-building measures have been identified as an area for possible progress in the region.

Rather, the relevance of the OSCE experience may rest with the more strategic question of how any such effort at regional-security dialogue can be made meaningful and most profitably sustained in the face of ongoing political differences and military change. If, at some point in the near future, various governments of the Gulf believe it useful to explore such a round of regional discussion, however informal in nature, the OSCE experience would suggest the following issues could prove decisive in setting its direction:

- Whether the regional discussions are truly inclusive of all states in the region,

and whether all actors are given equal status in the process. Is it possible for the Gulf parties and their external benefactors to construct a dialogue on mutual security concerns that recognizes both the common interests and the serious differences throughout the region, so that the resulting process could have the potential to include all states of the region? An inclusive process would take account of necessary contributions to regional security and stability made by extra-regional actors (such as the United States) and, most important, not appear to be directed against any single state or group of states.

- Whether participants in this dialogue could agree to focus initially on modest practical contributions to immediate problems – not political declarations light on substance nor overly ambitious notions of overarching solutions, but a carefully defined series of tangible steps to enhance political-military transparency, predictability and stability within a larger network of relationships.

- Whether any new process of dialogue could be designed to be both sustained and performance-based – with extensive verification mechanisms as well as regular opportunities to review progress in the implementation of commitments undertaken and to develop new ones.

- Whether, over time, this process could clearly link the goal of regional peace and stability not just with a resolution of outstanding border questions but to more comprehensive objectives as well: promoting good governance, fundamental freedoms and enhanced economic and environmental cooperation throughout the region, as well as encouraging the broader participation of all elements of each society in support of these goals.

One final observation: A mistake to avoid (and one that is all too frequent in most Euro-Atlantic discussions) is the constant use of architectural metaphors. The very language of security condominiums, charters and councils suggests more of a focus on a single static institutional end-state than on the sort of fluid and multi-channeled process of constant adjustment and readjustment that is far more likely to characterize reality. There will be greater utility in exploring informal, even indirect, arrangements that, for the foreseeable future at least, can preserve a high degree of bureaucratic flexibility, generate only modest popular expectations, and adapt easily to changing political circumstances. Perhaps ironically, careful consideration of the OSCE model suggests the wisdom of not locking into any single institutional formula or model.

¹ Some recent examples culled from the past year: Joseph McMillan, Richard Sokolsky and Andrew C. Winner provide in their article “Toward a New Regional Security Architecture” in the Summer 2003 issue of *The Washington Quarterly* a useful outline of the need for serious consideration of “a new process to add to the existing architecture of bilateral and multilateral arrangements in the Gulf . . .” (even as they also register useful cautionary notes against too ambitious an institutional approach). Senator John Edwards calls in January 2004 for establishment of an Organization for Security and Cooperation in the Middle East patterned closely along OSCE lines “with a goal of creating the new organization by the end of 2008.” In his article “Securing the Gulf” in *Foreign Affairs* of July/August 2003, Kenneth Pollack speaks, after reference to the OSCE and CFE experiences within Europe, of “a Gulf security condominium . . . entail(ing) a similar set of activities bringing together the United States, the GCC countries, Iraq, and Iran. The process would begin by establishing a regional security forum at which relevant issues could be debated and discussed, information exchanged and agreements framed.” David L. Phillips argues in the June 19, 2003, edition of *Al Hayat* for a “a Helsinki-type process for the Middle East.” George Perkovich, in his Carnegie Endowment paper of April 28, 2003, entitled

“Dealing with Iran's Nuclear Challenge” recommends “Washington should immediately seize the opportunity provided by the defeat of the Saddam Hussein to encourage the GCC States, Iran and Iraqis to form a working group to explore confidence-building measures . . .” In the context of discussing “alternative paths for security in the post-Saddam Persian Gulf,” Patrick Clawson in *Policy Watch* #743, April 2003, of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy notes in passing the option of “a cooperative threat reduction program similar to that in the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty.” From London, Steven Everts of the Centre for European Reform writes in the December 2003 issue of *Prospect* on “Iran: The Next Big Crisis” that “Europe should, together with the U.S. and Russia, take the lead in initiating a regional security dialogue aimed at reducing tensions and increasing transparency on military postures . . . loosely modeled on the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe . . . In foreign ministries around Europe, this idea of setting up an OSCE for the Middle East is now being quietly discussed.” Note as well the keynote address by Turkish Ambassador Omur Orhun at the October 20-22 2003 OSCE Seminar in Aqaba on the theme: “The Comprehensive Approach to Security: The OSCE Experience and Its Relevance for the Mediterranean Region.”

² The OSCE website, www.osce.org, contains a wealth of information on that organization's past history and current activities. This characterization of the OSCE approach to security is drawn directly from that OSCE overview. A similarly useful source is the website of the Helsinki Commission of the U.S. Congress at www.csce.gov/helsinki.cfm.

³ Among other useful observations contained in McMillan, Sokolsky and Winner, *op. cit.*

⁴ For the purposes of this presentation, I will generally use the term OSCE to cover both the original Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe created with conclusion of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975 and its more recent incarnation as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe dating from the Budapest Summit in 1994.

⁵ See the Helsinki Final Act, August 1, 1975, at www.osce.org.

⁶ Transformation of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe into the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe was recorded in the Budapest OSCE Summit Declaration “Towards Genuine Partnership in a New Era” at www.osce.org.

⁷ For some commentators looking at the Gulf today, one of the possible attractions of an OSCE-like arrangement for the region would be as a means of indirectly engaging an Iran now facing roughly comparable strategic circumstances. See the comments of both Everts and Perkovich, *op. cit.*

⁸ Details of these measures – themselves the evolution of earlier agreements within the OSCE dating back to the Stockholm Conference of the late 1980's – are laid out in the Vienna Document on the Negotiation of Confidence and Security-Building Measures (VD-99) agreed at the Istanbul OSCE Summit, November 1999, at www.osce.org.

⁹ See Peter Jones' treatment of past discussion of such measures in the SCRS context in his 1998 SIPRI paper “Towards a Regional Security Regime in the Middle East – Issues and Options.” Lawrence G. Potter has prepared an important and useful introductory exploration of the subject of confidence-building in the Gulf context in his chapter “Confidence Building Measures in the Persian Gulf” in the volume he has edited with Gary Sick: *The Persian Gulf at the Millennium: Essays in Politics, Economy, Security and Religion* (1997). See as well their follow-up volume of essays: *Security in the Persian Gulf: Origins, Obstacles and the Search for Consensus* (2002).

¹⁰ See the extensive work and writings on this subject by Michel Krepon of the Henry Stimson Center in Washington, DC; a useful outline of these measures and their implementation is reflected in “Confidence Building Measures in South Asia” at www.stimson.org/southasia.

¹¹ Examples drawn from the Congressional testimony of Assistant Secretary of State Elizabeth Jones on “U.S. Policy Towards the OSCE” of September 9, 2003, available at www.csce.gov/helsinki.cfm.

¹² Text of the adapted Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, agreed in November 1999, can also be found at www.osce.org. Of special note is the degree of transparency and verification afforded by the Treaty's provisions.