

Neither secure nor co-operative?

The potential future of the OSCE

Marina Ohanjanyan
Bob Deen
Kaspar Pucek

Clingendael Report



Clingendael

Netherlands Institute of International Relations



Clingendael

Netherlands Institute of International Relations

Neither secure nor co-operative?

The potential future of the OSCE

Marina Ohanjanyan

Bob Deen

Kaspar Pucek

Clingendael Report

March 2025

About the authors

Marina Ohanjanyan is a Senior Research Fellow at Clingendael's Security Unit, focusing mostly on the developments in and surrounding Russia and Eastern Europe. Marina's main research interests are the political developments within the countries in the region and the geopolitical dynamics surrounding them, democratisation processes and authoritarian tendencies in the region, (frozen) regional conflicts and the broader infrastructure of international security.

Bob Deen is a Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Security Unit of the Research department of the Clingendael Institute. He is also the Coordinator of the Clingendael Russia and Eastern Europe Centre (CREEC). His research focuses on international security issues, geopolitics, multilateral co-operation and inter-ethnic conflict, with a particular emphasis on Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.

Kaspar Pucek is a Research Fellow at the Security Unit and the Russia and Eastern Europe Centre (CREEC) of the Clingendael Institute. His research focuses on the geopolitics, politics, and political economy of Russia, as well as the wider Eurasian and Eastern European regions.

Contents

Executive Summary	1
Historical Analysis	1
Three scenarios	2
Conclusions and Recommendations	3
1 Introduction	7
2 Historical analysis	9
2.1 Cold War Détente	9
2.2 The normative and geopolitical convergence of the late 1980s and 1990s	14
2.3 A gathering storm: 2000 to 2022	22
3 The OSCE's Future: three scenarios	30
3.1 Scenario I: containment and confrontation	30
3.2 Scenario II: Détente 2.0	34
3.3 Scenario III: Geopolitical Convergence	36
4 Conclusions	39
5 Recommendations	41

Executive Summary

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is nearing its 50-year anniversary in 2025 in a Europe that is neither secure nor prone to effective cooperation. This presents a natural occasion for contemplating the organisation's past and potential future paths.

Historical Analysis

The OSCE's history can be subdivided into roughly three time periods: the Cold War Détente (1970s – early 1980s), normative and geopolitical convergence (late 1980s-1990s), and a period of growing crisis in the relations between Russia and the West (from the 2000s onwards).

During the Cold War Détente, in an era of cautious political will to reach workable agreements, especially concerning the most prioritised (hard security) questions, the OSCE's precursor, the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), showed that it can play a positive, facilitating role provided that the main actors have a genuine political will to attain tangible results. This can then lead to bigger openings on other issues of importance. In the 1990s era of rapprochement, with the major actors driven by practical as well as ideological motives to seek better understanding, the OSCE experienced its greatest empowerment. The political goodwill on either side of the (former) divide catapulted the organisation into action, providing fertile ground for expanding its activities, mandates and organisational structure. Finally, from the late 1990s/early 2000s onwards, there has been a clear diminution of the OSCE's role that went in parallel with the deteriorating relationship between Russia and the West. The OSCE fell victim to its consensus-based foundation, allowing obstructionist actors – mainly, but not limited to, Russia – to hold the organisation hostage not just in terms of projects and initiatives, but also, at times, its very functioning. Yet again, the OSCE's effectiveness proved a function of the political will of its participants to cooperate.

Three scenarios

Using this historical background as inspiration, this paper presents three potential scenarios for the future of the OSCE and the consequences, in each scenario, for the organisation's effectiveness in implementing its tools and achieving its goals.

In scenario 1, Containment and Confrontation, the war in Ukraine drags on as an active military conflict, with neither of the parties managing to achieve a convincing victory, or willing to begin negotiations. The standoff between Russia and the West intensifies and reaches its full force. The OSCE's decision-making is mostly paralysed because of the entrenched and extreme differences between the two camps, and is unable to effectively use most of its instruments. It however continues to be a unique regional platform that brings together all conflicting parties, thus retaining the potential of informal encounters which, while difficult to gauge in terms of concrete impact, may still open up space for more meaningful communication in the long(er) term.

In scenario 2, Détente 2.0, after a prolonged conflict, the war in Ukraine is a quagmire of static frontlines and war fatigue is rife in both Russia and the West. As motivation for armed conflict ebbs, some space emerges for communication and cooperation on a limited number of issues that both Russia and the West prioritise: mainly hard security and arms control. The OSCE can reinvigorate its role as a platform for and a facilitator of contacts and dialogue, at least on those questions. The OSCE is also well placed to conduct any monitoring activities that may result from these discussions, should the parties reach any agreements. Activities within the human dimension, while not realistic in the Russian context, are still possible in relation to third countries that wish to work in this direction. As part of the human dimension, the civil societies of various participating states can still play an important role in relevant activities and dialogues.

In scenario 3, in an unexpected turn of events, President Putin is replaced by a new leadership that is highly motivated to undo the biggest damage to Russia's economic and geopolitical standing as a result of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, or even launch Russia's return to the OSCE commitments. The regime softens in all directions, and creates an opening for talks on Ukraine in a purely pragmatic bid to bring some kind of resolution that would allow for the Western sanctions to be lifted. With a genuine will on both sides to reach tangible results, the OSCE is reinvigorated. It is better able not only to engage in more effective

decision-making, but also to restart normative discussions on the future of the European security architecture and the values of the Helsinki Final Act.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Having considered the OSCE's history and the potential future developments sketched out in the scenarios, a number of **conclusions** can be drawn:

- The OSCE's effectiveness as an organisation is highly dependent on the geopolitical context and political will of the participating states. These interrelated conditions are outside of the OSCE's own control and are largely a function of the dynamic of the relationship between Russia and the West. In this regard it is important to note that this relationship – as well as the relationship between the US and its European allies – may undergo certain changes in the coming years depending on the policies of the newly installed Trump administration, that would likely also affect the OSCE and its functioning.
- In any scenario the OSCE remains one of the options on a broader menu of international organisations that can be utilized as an instrument for peace and stability, and it is important to keep that option on the menu. Even if its possibilities are temporarily limited, its unique characteristics and instruments may be in demand in the future.
- Considering the OSCE's core characteristics, in particular its dependence on consensus among a large number of participating States, the organisation can hardly be expected to resolve protracted conflicts on its own. It is, however, ideally placed to provide the necessary platforms to facilitate negotiations, monitoring and the verification of agreements. In other words, the OSCE is unable to ensure the signing of a peace treaty, but it could play an important role in what happens next.

With these conclusions in mind, a number of recommendations can be made. General Recommendations are future-proof policy options that can and should be implemented in any case, irrespective of further geopolitical developments. The other recommendations are more responsive in nature and will be linked to the three scenarios of geopolitical developments described above.

General Recommendations

- *Communicate clearly* what the OSCE is, and more crucially, what it is not. The idea that the OSCE is not by itself able or equipped to resolve conflicts is not one that is understood clearly and widely outside the organisation.

Such misconceptions lead to unrealistic expectations and ensuing disappointment, disillusionment and cynicism among the wider public and national political circles.

- *Draw lessons from the past and prepare for the future.* In one way or another, the war in Ukraine will end one day. This is when the OSCE can contribute its greatest value, in facilitating what happens next. The OSCE should prepare for “the day after” and consider various scenarios and its role in each of them. As part of such preparations the OSCE should thoroughly analyse past practices and draw its lessons. One such lesson, for instance, pertains to any new monitoring mission to Ukraine, which would have to be more robust than the 2014 SMM.
- *Focus on risk reduction.* However the developments may unfold, this element will remain crucial as well as feasible, as it extensively builds on informal contacts that the OSCE facilitates.
- *Survive until better times and retain institutional knowledge.* Make sure that the organisational structure persists in an era of lacking political will and prioritisation by the participating states, until there are such changes in the geopolitical environment that allow for more. In the meantime, find ways to retain the knowledge and experience present within the OSCE in order to hit the ground running once it is needed.
- *Be creative.* Identify all and any issues of common interest for the participating states, even if they have widely differing perspectives. Facilitate talks and processes that are relevant to those issues, and use that space to probe other subjects or avenues that could lead to a wider range of discussions, even if in the (distant) future.

Recommendations for Scenario 1: Containment and confrontation

- *Continue to make use of any of the instruments still available.* Among these, do not underestimate the importance of the informal contacts the OSCE facilitates, but do not overestimate them either, as they are not a goal in and of themselves. It is also important to continue implementing projects in countries that may still be open to democratic transformation, conflict mitigation or monitoring. In addition, risk reduction and deterrence could be helped by a measure of openness, e.g. providing information on military exercised etc.
- *Positioning.* Once the war in Ukraine ends, any deals that are negotiated and reached would need credible security arrangements, like monitoring and verification. Even if a leading role for the OSCE may prove too ambitious, it is important to position the organisation for a possible supporting role in the

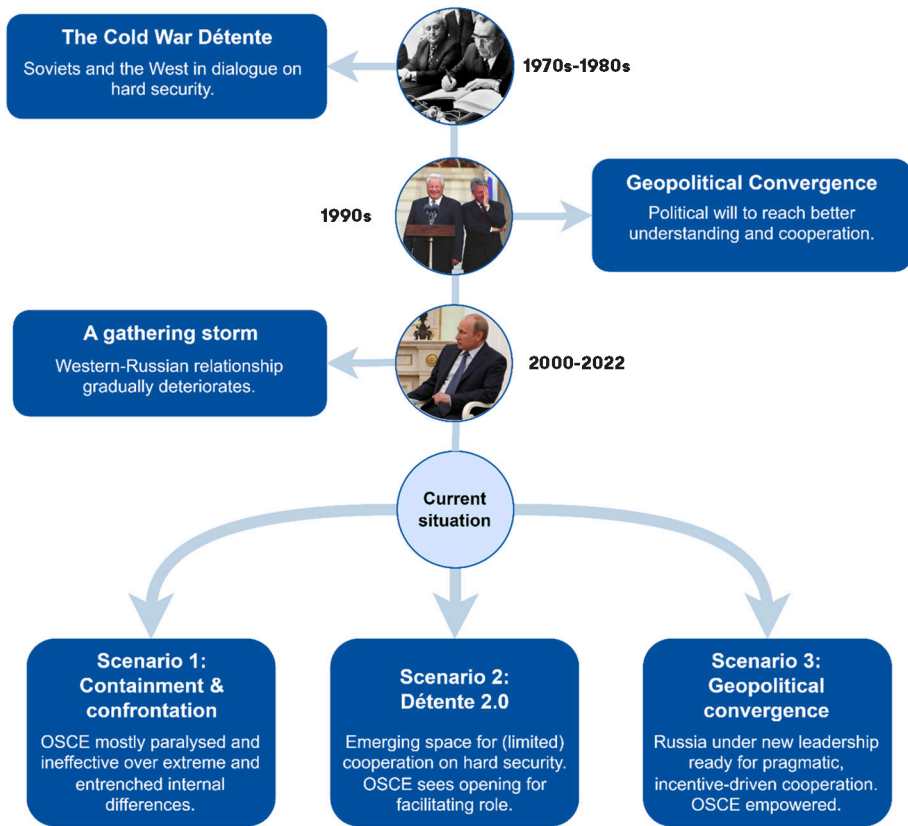
implementation of any political agreements. Other, smaller (frozen) conflicts in the region may present the OSCE with possibilities to take on a more leading role.

Recommendations for Scenario 2: Détente 2.0

- *Empower the OSCE if and when possible.* A number of OSCE instruments could be preserved in a meaningful way even in difficult realities. It would be important, however, to equip them with sufficient mandate independence and funding. This includes the autonomous institutions (HCNM, ODIHR, RFoM), field presences and the informal OSCE mechanisms at the OSCE's disposal, like its convening power
- *Continue working with those that are willing to cooperate.* By continuing to work with participating states that are still open to cooperation and dialogue, the OSCE can ensure some level of continuous cooperation, discussion and meaningful exchanges.

Recommendations for Scenario 3: Geopolitical convergence

- *Be ambitious.* As the space for dialogue and cooperation increases along with the political will of major actors to reach agreements, the OSCE should make maximum use of this opportunity. This includes not only facilitating the ensuing talks and negotiations, but also pushing for a comprehensive discussion about the future of the security architecture in Europe.
- *Reform.* This scenario is the only one in which space opens up for a constructive discussion on the future of the OSCE itself. This should lead to an open dialogue on possible reforms within the OSCE, including its fundamental principles – like the principle of consensus, but also issues related specifically to budget policy – so as to ensure the organisation's effective functioning during potential future crises.



1 Introduction

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is nearing its 50-year anniversary in 2025 in a Europe that is neither secure nor prone to effective cooperation. This presents a natural occasion for contemplating the organisation's past and, more importantly, potential future paths. Established in 1975 as a result of extensive negotiations between the Eastern and Western blocs, the CSCE (as the precursor of the OSCE) upon its inception embodied a promise for a safer and freer region from Vancouver to Vladivostok. Fifty years later, however, that promise is under pressure to an unprecedented extent.

Rising geopolitical tensions between Russia and the West in recent years, have significantly hampered the effectiveness of the OSCE. The more recent dynamics related to the international policies of the US Trump administration have added a level of unpredictability. The OSCE, an organisation that was specifically designed to help manage East-West tensions, appears to have become paralyzed at a time when it seems to be most needed. In particular since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the organisation has become entwined in an internal crisis caused by seemingly irreconcilable differences in worldviews and interests. This has led to crippling vetoes and a steady erosion of the capacity of various OSCE structures, as well as a lack of compliance with OSCE commitments, in particular by Russia. As the OSCE is approaching its 50-year anniversary in Helsinki in 2025, it faces an uncertain future.

Given how dependent the organisation is on consensus among its participating states, its future will primarily depend on the geopolitical context in which it will have to operate. This paper will therefore map out three different geopolitical scenarios and will analyse to what extent and in what manner the OSCE could play a role in shaping a new European security architecture and how its existing instruments could be used in these scenarios. Given Mark Twain's observation that "history doesn't necessarily repeat itself, but it often rhymes", the paper will begin with an analysis of the OSCE's past before looking at its potential future(s). Important lessons can be drawn from the genesis of the organisation and the way in which it has adapted to different geopolitical periods.

Chapter 2 will therefore contain a brief analysis of the history of the OSCE, and in particular how the organisation has developed within different geopolitical

contexts. The analysis will be divided into three periods: 1) the *détente* between the Soviet Union and the West during the 1970s; 2) the period of normative and geopolitical convergence between Moscow and the West during the late 1980s and 1990s ; and 3) the period of growing crisis in the relations between Russia and the West from the early 2000s until the present day. In each period, we will analyze how the OSCE's instruments developed, as well as the geopolitical contexts within which they proved effective or ineffective. We divide the organisation's core instruments into the following clusters: 1) the human dimension of promoting democracy and human rights; 2) the political/military dimension of arms control and preventing direct East-West military confrontation; and 3) the specific role of the OSCE in the management and resolution of protracted conflicts. The economic and environmental dimensions of the OSCE will not be covered due to their limited relevance for the primary research question.

In Chapter 3, the analysis of the historical development and effectiveness of the core instruments of the OSCE will then provide the background for three possible scenarios, which will present three different potential geopolitical contexts within which the OSCE may find itself within the next few years: 1) Containment and confrontation, 2) *Détente 2.0*, and 3) Geopolitical convergence. Each of these scenarios will include an analysis of the role of the OSCE as an organisation, and the usefulness of the three sets of OSCE instruments (human dimension, political-military dimension and conflict management).

Finally, Chapter 4 will close with some conclusions and recommendations for policymakers and the OSCE itself.

In preparing this paper the authors made use of qualitative literature research as well as interviews with experts with direct knowledge and/or experience of the history and workings of the OSCE.

2 Historical analysis

2.1 Cold War Détente

Geopolitical Context

The Conference for Security and Co-operation (CSCE), the precursor of the OSCE, came into existence in the Cold War era of détente during the 1970s. Following the heated rivalry between the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in the wake of World War II, both superpowers, as well as key American allies like France and Germany, agreed to lower tensions in order to avoid a military clash and nuclear war (especially following the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962), as well as to put a halt to the arms race and reduce defence expenditure.¹

Although attempts at détente actually began in Europe in the early 1960s with Charles de Gaulle's attempt to balance against US predominance in Western European affairs and Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik*, it was the commitment of the two superpowers – the US and the USSR – that was crucial for the success of détente, including the creation of the CSCE. From a US perspective, lowering tensions with Moscow was important primarily in order to reduce the risk of war. Not only was the nuclear threat posed by the USSR growing as the Soviets rapidly expanded their nuclear arsenal, but the Soviet Red Army and its Warsaw Pact allies also had the advantage in terms of conventional military forces on the European continent.² Some Western allies hoped that by accepting the existing borders while developing the human and economic dimensions the Eastern bloc's societies would gradually change from within.

On the Soviet side, a desire to reduce tensions with the US had already set in during the years following Stalin's death in 1953, when his successor Nikita Khrushchev abandoned the idea that the rivalry between the socialist and capitalist blocs would necessarily lead to war, in favour of economic and

1 Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 381-382.

2 Michael Cotey Morgan, "North America, Atlanticism, and the making of the Helsinki Final Act," in *Origins of the European Security System: The Helsinki process revisited, 1965-75*, eds. Andreas Wenger, Vojtech Mastny, and Christian Nuenlist (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2008), 27-28; Westad, *The Cold War*, 382-383, 385-387, 407-408.

technological system-to-system rivalry that came to be known as “peaceful coexistence.” Khrushchev’s successor, Leonid Brezhnev, took this even further by seeking to collaborate with the US on arms control and increased trade, while also seeking Western investments for the Soviet economy. This was driven in part by Brezhnev’s ambition for peaceful relations across the Iron Curtain and a desire to curtail the expenses of the arms race by the mutual recognition of the status quo as established in Europe after World War 2. Furthermore, Soviet economic growth was slowing down and trade with the West, in particular technology imports, as well as attracting Western capital investments came to be seen as an important instrument to raise the living standards of the Soviet population and to modernize Soviet industry. Moreover, following the tensions with China resulting from the Sino-Soviet split, as well as the roughly simultaneous Sino-American rapprochement, Moscow saw *détente* with the West as an important instrument to prevent geopolitical encirclement by hostile powers.³

Détente certainly produced results. In 1972 the US and the USSR signed both the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I), which committed them to limitations on their ballistic missile arsenals, and the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which placed limits on the anti-ballistic missile systems that both sides could deploy. In addition, economic cooperation led to an increase in East-West trade, including the vital gas pipeline infrastructure that powered Western European industry for many decades to come. Meanwhile, Western companies helped the USSR to modernize factories and introduce new industrial products, although this did little to avert the Soviet economy’s stagnation.⁴ Finally, *détente* created the necessary conditions for the CSCE to come into existence. While the heyday of *détente* ended with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, it essentially resumed soon after Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985, gradually ushering in a period of normative and geopolitical convergence between East and West.

The CSCE

The ratification of the Helsinki Final Act (HFA) of the CSCE in 1975 was in many ways the high point of *détente*, at least as far as the European continent was

3 Sergey Radchenko, *To Run the World: The Kremlin’s Cold War Bid for Global Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), chap. 13; Marie-Pierre Rey, “The USSR and the Helsinki process, 1969–75: Optimism, doubt, or defiance?,” in *Origins of the European Security System: The Helsinki process revisited, 1965–75*, eds. Andreas Wenger, Vojtech Mastny, and Christian Nuenlist (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2008), 69-70.

4 Radchenko, *To Run the World*, 314.

concerned. It was the first pan-European summit since the end of the Napoleonic Wars, and also included the US and Canada.⁵

The HFA was the result of more than two years of negotiations involving the two superpowers and their European allies and satellite states. But the origins of the CSCE went all the way back to Soviet efforts during the 1950s and 1960s to seek recognition for the postwar borders in Europe and its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. As a consequence of World War II, the Soviet Union had gained unprecedented strategic depth, annexing the Baltic states, parts of Finland, Poland, Germany, and Romania, while also gaining a slew of satellite states in Eastern Europe all the way into central Germany. As a result, the Russian heartland – traditionally exposed to invasions from Europe due to a lack of geographical boundaries – was now better protected than ever before in history. As such, the USSR had become a status quo power in Europe and the Soviets were eager to consolidate their strategic gains. Moreover, for Brezhnev the CSCE also became a personal prestige project to solidify his reputation as a “man of peace”.⁶

The United States and its Western European allies, however, took longer to become interested in the pan-European security conference that the Soviets proposed. The US government was particularly sceptical concerning this project, fearing the perceived legitimisation it would provide for what was essentially a Soviet occupation of countries in Central and Eastern Europe (see below). Even when, by the 1970s, as discussed above, this attitude changed and the project got off the ground, American expectations of the CSCE remained low. Washington saw it mainly as an instrument to placate Western European aspirations for improving relations across the Iron Curtain divide on the continent.⁷ The Helsinki Final Act was signed in August 1975. It consisted of a “Decalogue” listing ten key principles and three “baskets” of cooperation and security. The baskets focused on the politico-military, economic-environmental,

5 Michael Cotey Morgan, *The Final Act: The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 4.

6 Morgan, *The Final Act*, 9; Radchenko, *To Run the World*, 68; Rey, “The USSR and the Helsinki process,” 68; Andreas Wenger and Vojtech Mastny, “New perspectives on the origins of the CSCE process,” in *Origins of the European Security System: The Helsinki process revisited, 1965–75*, eds. Andreas Wenger, Vojtech Mastny, and Christian Nuenlist (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2008), 13.

7 P. Terrence Hopmann, “The US and the CSCE/OSCE,” *Helsinki Monitor* 11, no. 2 (2000): 21.

and human dimensions of European security respectively.⁸ Unsurprisingly, Moscow was from the beginning primarily interested in the first two baskets, while the West was primarily interested in the third one.⁹ With a 'package deal' that included a human dimension focused on human rights and fundamental freedoms, the HFA, and thus the CSCE, had broadened the concept of security significantly beyond the boundaries of the politico-military and economic dimensions that the USSR was interested in.¹⁰ Moreover, due to its geographic scope the CSCE created an unprecedented inclusive forum for dialogue between the American-led and Soviet blocs that consisted of no less than 35 participating states. On the other hand, the HFA was not legally binding and did not have treaty status. Moreover, while the CSCE had a set of procedural rules for periodic follow-up meetings, it lacked permanent, formal institutional structures.¹¹

The "Decalogue"

The principles of the Decalogue focused on state sovereignty, peaceful and cooperative relations among states, territorial integrity and the inviolability of state borders, non-intervention in the internal affairs of states, self-determination, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms (such as the freedom of speech, assembly, association, and movement).

The HFA was clearly a compromise between the Soviet insistence on postwar borders and the Western insistence on the possibility for peaceful change and the inclusion of human rights.¹² As such, the Helsinki Final Act allowed for borders to change by peaceful means and did not recognize the Soviet annexation of the Baltic states. But undoubtedly the largest Soviet concession was the inclusion of

8 David J. Galbreath and Malte Brosig, "OSCE," in *Routledge Handbook on the European Union and International Institutions: Performance, Policy, Power*, eds. Knud Erik Jørgensen and Katie Verlin Laatikainen (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York : Routledge, 2013), 272.

9 Elena Kropatcheva, "The Evolution of Russia's OSCE Policy: From the Promises of the Helsinki Final Act to the Ukrainian Crisis," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 23, no. 1 (2015): 9-10.

10 Pál Dunay, *The OSCE in Crisis*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Chaillot Paper No. 88 (April 2006), 20; Morgan, *The Final Act*, 9-10.

11 William H. Hill, *No Place for Russia: European Security Institutions Since 1989* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 54-55.

12 Morgan, "North America, Atlanticism," 32.

a third basket focusing on human rights.¹³ Although its impact remained limited and largely symbolic during the Cold War (see below), the third basket laid the foundation for a significantly expanded human dimension during the era of normative and geopolitical convergence between Russia and the West during the 1990s.

The Instruments of the CSCE

Although the main (nuclear) arms control negotiations (SALT and ABM) of the *détente* period took place outside of the framework of the CSCE, the organisation was not insignificant in this sphere either. Through a set of confidence-building measures (CBMs), the participating states in the CSCE increased transparency. Specifically, the HFA called upon its signatories to notify all other participating states in the CSCE of significant military manoeuvres and to allow foreign observers to witness them. Even so, it took until the mid-1980s for the Soviets to accept Western on-sight inspectors.¹⁴ Despite the modest nature of these achievements in the politico-military basket during the *détente* era, they did lay the foundation for more elaborate arms control negotiations during the periods of renewed *détente* and convergence starting in the later 1980s.

As for the third basket, the human dimension, the HFA led to the creation of independent, indigenous Helsinki monitoring groups, or Helsinki Committees, in the Soviet Union and most of its Eastern European satellite states, which publicized violations of the Helsinki Accords in these countries. However, the Helsinki Committees were hamstrung by the fact that, in accordance with the non-intervention principle, humanitarian cooperation stemming from the HFA was to take place within the confines of the laws and regulations of the states in question, as the Soviets had insisted. The non-intervention principle thus trumped the joint commitment to respect human rights. Nonetheless, Eastern bloc states still opted to quickly disperse these groups and incarcerate their members.¹⁵ But despite the fact that the human basket remained largely symbolic during the Cold War, its symbolism empowered the dissident movement and undermined the legitimacy of the Soviet system,¹⁶ although the role this played in pressuring the

13 Galbreath and Brosig, "OSCE," 27; Morgan, "North America, Atlanticism," 32; Morgan, *The Final Act*, 11-12; Radchenko, *To Run the World*, 436-437.

14 Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 22-23; Morgan, *The Final Act*, 12.

15 Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 22-23; Morgan, *The Final Act*, 12-13.

16 Radchenko, *To Run the World*, 438.

Soviet Union to reform and change its foreign policy, let alone in bringing about the Soviet collapse, is hard to determine.

2.2 The normative and geopolitical convergence of the late 1980s and 1990s

Geopolitical Context

The final years of the Cold War and the first decade following the Soviet collapse produced an unprecedented normative and geopolitical convergence between Moscow – since December 1991 the capital of an independent Russian Federation – and the West. Starting with Mikhail Gorbachev’s democratic reforms and his “new thinking” in Soviet foreign policy and accelerating during the presidency of Boris Yeltsin, Moscow increasingly embraced the ideology and even institutions of (liberal) democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. As such, the dramatic ideological (and institutional) differences between Russia and the West that had characterized much of the twentieth century disappeared – or at least substantially narrowed – seemingly overnight. Despite the chaotic political and social environment, as well as the pervasive corruption and state predation resulting from the weakness of checks on executive power and the limited independence of the judiciary, the Russian Federation’s presidential and parliamentary elections were remarkably competitive during the 1990s. There was no substantial outright fraud, like in the 2000s, even though, also then, elections could be free but still far from fair¹⁷. If nothing else, Yeltsin lacked the levers of power to orchestrate elections in the way that Vladimir Putin later would.

Simultaneously with Moscow’s democratic turn, there was also a geopolitical convergence between Russia and the West, as Moscow increasingly saw the West as a partner. Yeltsin and his cohorts opted for a strong pro-Western foreign policy course, deepening and broadening Gorbachev’s foreign policies of previous years. These views were strongly held inside the Presidential Administration and some government structures (above all the Foreign Ministry). At the same time, there was never a serious move to integrate Russia into NATO

17 One example of this pertains to the dubious sources of Yeltsin’s campaign financing. See for instance: Lee Hockstader and David Hoffman, [Yeltsin Campaign Rose From Tears to Triumph](#), The Washington Post, July 6 1996

or the EU. Meanwhile, others believed that Russia should develop an independent foreign policy befitting a great power and strive for a multi-polar world. This idea was held, for instance, by foreign minister and then prime minister Yevgeny Primakov. The most radical version of the realist and geopolitical school of thought persisted within the Russian armed and security forces. Many people there still considered the West as an enemy that could one day strike militarily against Russia. Many believed that Russia should dominate the post-Soviet Eurasian space, and perhaps even re-establish direct territorial control.¹⁸

Russia's initial enthusiastic pro-Western stance had already come to an end during the mid-1990s, long before Putin came to power. Over time, Russian elites became disillusioned that, in their view, Western partners – and in particular the US – did not see Moscow as a great power, let alone an equal. Russia's great-power status was not a mere policy option, but rather a cornerstone of its very national identity. Another conflict emerged over the bombing of Yugoslavia by NATO during the Kosovo war in 1999. Suddenly, NATO seemed to turn into an offensive alliance. It had attacked a country with strong political, cultural and historical links to Russia, without seeking authorization from the UN Security Council and despite Russian protests. During that same year, NATO also expanded eastwards by including new member states among Moscow's former satellites in Eastern Europe, specifically Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, which in Russia's view went against a promise made by the US, at the time of the German unification, for the alliance not to expand eastwards¹⁹. Moscow had always opposed NATO expansion going back to the days of Gorbachev, but it could do little to stop it. The Russian military establishment was particularly wary of this, seeing it as a direct threat to Russia, and fearing Western nuclear and conventional deployments in Poland in particular. The result of this gradual disillusionment with the West was that Russia increasingly started to develop its own foreign policy, independent of the West. This happened primarily once Yevgeny Primakov became foreign minister in 1996. Russia began

18 Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), chaps. 1-2.

19 This perceived promise, of NATO not expanding to the East, pertains to a notion that was briefly implied in the context of Germany's unification. This notion was, however, never formalized or put on paper as part of further negotiations or in any agreement. Mary Elise Sarotte, [A Broken Promise? What the West Really Told Moscow About NATO Expansion](#), Foreign Affairs, August 11, 2014

to aspire towards a multipolar world order, in which Russia and other powers would balance against Western hegemony.²⁰

From CSCE to OSCE

Gorbachev's limited but significant democratization of the Soviet political system combined with the fall of the communist regimes throughout Eastern Europe paved the way for the CSCE participants to jointly adopt broader and deeper commitments to democratic governance, political freedoms, market economies, and human rights during the CSCE's Copenhagen and Paris meetings in 1990.²¹ Whereas in the 1970s, the Soviet Union had grudgingly agreed to the inclusion of commitments to human rights, now states from across the European continent – including the USSR/Russia – were voluntarily adopting shared liberal democratic principles and were open to being reviewed by their peers in order to gain international legitimacy. As a result of this, over the course of the 1990s the human dimension CSCE/OSCE rapidly gained in prominence.²²

Moreover, instead of the HFA's principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states, the CSCE's Moscow meeting in 1991 declared that the "commitments undertaken in the field of the human dimension of the CSCE are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating states and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the State concerned."²³ In combination with the broader reorientation towards the human dimension, this also meant that the focus of the organisation shifted increasingly to the internal politics of the post-communist states in Eastern Europe.²⁴ Meanwhile, in the sphere of hard security the end of the Cold War brought about a shift in the focus of the CSCE away from conflicts between states – especially between the superpowers of the bipolar era and their allies/satellites – and towards conflicts within states. This was driven by both the decrease in tensions between the great powers, as well as by a simultaneous increase in ethnic tensions and national minority issues following the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.²⁵

20 Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, chaps. 1-2.

21 Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 55.

22 Dunay, *The OSCE in Crisis*, 21.

23 Cited in: Christopher H. Smith, [25th Anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act \(remarks\)](#), Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, July 27, 2000.

24 Galbreath and Brosig, "OSCE," 273-274.

25 Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 123-124.

The conflicts that broke out in the former Yugoslavia and in some former Soviet republics that had now become independent states accelerated the gradual institutionalization of the CSCE, which thereby transformed into a genuine intergovernmental organisation with a permanent headquarters and multiple, permanent departments.²⁶ During the early 1990s, many of the institutions that nowadays form the institutional core of the OSCE were established,²⁷ which went hand-in-hand with expanding mandates. The CSCE's 1992 Helsinki Document, for instance, authorized the organisation to embark on civilian and military peacekeeping missions (with the exception of enforcement actions). This institutional transformation was symbolically capped at the Budapest Summit in December 1994, where the CSCE was renamed as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, or OSCE, thus becoming a fully-fledged organisation.²⁸ Along with its institutionalization and name change, the CSCE/OSCE evolved from adopting norms and outlining principles to making actual policy and carrying out operations.²⁹

During the Cold War era, different states – and, most importantly, the great powers – had pursued different goals through the CSCE/OSCE. In the 1990s, however, the United States became more interested in the institution as the CSCE evolved into an instrument for spreading liberal values of democracy and market-oriented economies to former Soviet bloc countries.³⁰ But it was not just the promotion of democracy that interested American policymakers. During the 1990s, conflict prevention and management was also important. In fact, in both realms – democracy promotion and conflict management – the CSCE/OSCE provided a forum where both the United States and the Russian Federation were members and could communicate as equals, something which neither the EU nor NATO could provide.³¹ The CSCE/OSCE thus came to be seen as an important complement to the EU and NATO, but not as a substitute for either

26 Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 68, 88.

27 This includes the Secretariat and the position of Secretary General, the Conflict Prevention Centre, the Office of Free Elections (nowadays the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, or ODIHR), and the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM).

28 Dunay, *The OSCE in Crisis*, 20-21; Galbreath and Brosig, "OSCE," 272-274; Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 57-58, 95, 99-100; P. Terrence Hopmann, "The OSCE role in Eurasian security," in *Limiting institutions? The Challenge of Eurasian Security Governance*, eds. James Sperling, Victor Papacosma, Sean Kay (Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2018), 149.

29 Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 95.

30 Hopmann, "The US and the CSCE/OSCE," 24-25.

31 Galbreath and Brosig, "OSCE," 271.

of them, as it lacked both NATO's military capabilities and the EU's economic institutions and financial resources.³² While Washington kept on seeing NATO as the most important element of the European security architecture, it also saw some practical use in using the OSCE to soothe Moscow's frustrations over NATO enlargement,³³ even though parallel efforts in the context of the NATO-Russia Council remained the more important attempt at dealing with Moscow's frustrations of not being taken seriously.

Moscow, meanwhile, sought to restructure the entire European security architecture around the CSCE/OSCE, an organisation in which – unlike in NATO or the EU – it had membership and was an equal partner of Europe and, most importantly, the US. Under both Gorbachev and Yeltsin, the Kremlin had hoped that the CSCE/OSCE could replace not just the Warsaw Pact but also NATO, thereby at least marginalizing and ideally getting rid of the dreaded Western military alliance that Moscow always considered as a threat to its security.³⁴ As part of these efforts, Moscow sought to expand the role and capabilities of the CSCE/OSCE, hoping to transform it into a fully-fledged, treaty-based intergovernmental organisation with legally binding commitments and an “Executive Council” in which Russia, similar to the UN Security Council, would have a veto over all fundamental security-related decisions on the European continent. Unsurprisingly, however, Russia's Western interlocutors – first and foremost the US – had no incentive to support this.³⁵ To Moscow's growing frustration, instead of the CSCE/OSCE replacing NATO, the alliance, as well as the EU, gradually enlarged into Eastern Europe.

Despite all of its frustrations, however, the CSCE/OSCE still offered Moscow a unique and irreplaceable instrument to retain a say in security matters in Eastern Europe after the Warsaw Pact and Soviet Union collapsed.³⁶ And, somewhat paradoxically, while generally aiming to boost the CSCE's/OSCE's mandate and institutional structures, the Kremlin was anxious to keep its presence and

32 Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 59, 102; Hopmann, “The US and the CSCE/OSCE,” 27-30; Hopmann, “The OSCE role,” 146-147.

33 Dunay, *The OSCE in Crisis*, 65-66; Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 125.

34 Dunay, *The OSCE in Crisis*, 69; Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 54, 56-57, 59; Kropatcheva, “Russia's OSCE Policy,” 10.

35 Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 123-124, 169; Kropatcheva, “Russia's OSCE Policy,” 11.

36 Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 59.

activities (e.g. in election monitoring) in the former Soviet Union – which it still regarded as its natural sphere of influence – limited.³⁷

The Instruments of the OSCE during the 1990s

As the CSCE evolved into the OSCE, the “baskets” were redefined as “dimensions,” which retained the same themes as before, but whose instruments were further expanded as the OSCE was increasingly institutionalized.

When the US and USSR significantly reduced tensions, and in particular following the Soviet collapse in 1991, incentives aligned for all the relevant parties – the US, a crisis-ridden Russia, and European states – to address the security dilemma of the Cold War and significantly reduce their conventional armed forces on the European continent. As a result, at the CSCE Summit in Paris in November 1990 the participants signed the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty. The CFE Treaty was meant to reduce conventional forces in Europe and maintain conventional parity between NATO and the Warsaw Pact through regional limits within each bloc that were meant to cap concentrations of troops and equipment. The Adapted CFE (ACFE) Treaty,³⁸ that was produced at the OSCE’s November 1999 Istanbul Summit, recast the territorial ceilings on troops and military equipment to reflect the geopolitical realities of the post-Cold War era. This provided Russia with important guarantees that, despite NATO’s enlargement, the alliance’s forces would remain fairly distant from Russia’s borders. In addition, the ACFE also increased transparency by imposing stricter requirements regarding inspections and exchanges of information.³⁹

At that same Istanbul Summit, the OSCE also adopted the Charter for European Security, which became a compromise of different elements from different visions of what the OSCE should be. As such, the document reflected more an amalgam of competing aspirations for the organisation than a genuine roadmap for the future direction in which it was going to develop.⁴⁰

Apart from conventional arms control, the CSCE/OSCE also expanded its confidence-building measures (CBMs). The key agreement to safeguard peace

37 Kropatcheva, “Russia’s OSCE Policy,” 10.

38 The original CFE Treaty was outdated by the time it entered into force in 1992, with the dissolution of both the USSR and the Warsaw Pact.

39 Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 153, 157-160.

40 Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 153-155.

and enhance security through CBMs was the Vienna Document 1990 from November of that year. It obligated the participating states to annual exchanges of important military information (including military personnel and equipment, future plans, and defence budgets) and to notify other participants of military activities such as exercises and accept on-sight inspections. Moreover, the Vienna Document 1990 gave participating states the right to inquire about military activities in a participating state that caused concern.⁴¹ The Vienna Document was updated in 1994 and at the 1999 Istanbul Summit, as a result of which these CBMs were somewhat expanded and deepened.⁴²

While the politico-military dimension initially focused exclusively on inter-state relations, and largely on military matters (primarily confidence-building measures and conventional arms control), during the 1990s it expanded to include conflict prevention, management, and resolution, in particular in response to the violence erupting in the former Yugoslavia and the post-Soviet periphery. Moreover, unlike during the Cold War era, the CSCE/OSCE now developed the ability to deploy field missions.⁴³

Given the number of conflicts that emerged among CSCE/OSCE participants during the 1990s, it is obvious that the organisation's conflict prevention powers were limited. At the same time, the extent to which the CSCE/OSCE has been able to prevent conflict is hard to gauge for the simple reason that successful conflict prevention is not very visible.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, the preventive diplomacy by the High Commissioner on National Minorities and the CSCE/OSCE Monitor Mission to Skopje do seem to have played a role in preventing large-scale clashes from breaking out between Serbia and Macedonia during the 1990s.⁴⁵ But the clearest case of successful conflict prevention was undoubtedly the OSCE mission sent to Ukraine during the mid-1990s to mediate between Kyiv and the Russian nationalist authorities of Crimea, which led to the conclusion of an agreement by which the Crimean authorities remained loyal to Kyiv in exchange

41 Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 42-43.

42 Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 157.

43 Dunay, *The OSCE in Crisis*, 37-38; Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 68, 153.

44 Dunay, *The OSCE in Crisis*, 46.

45 P. Terrence Hopmann, "An Evaluation of the OSCE's Role in Conflict Management," in *Europe's New Security Challenges*, eds. Heinz Gärtner, Adrian Hyde-Price, and Erich Reiter (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 234.

for substantial regional autonomy.⁴⁶ Another notable success was the OSCE Assistance Group in Chechnya, which in 1995-96 became an active mediator between Russian officials and Chechen rebel leaders and played an important role in bringing the war to an end. Even so, the OSCE could not prevent Russia from resuming military action in Chechnya in 1999.⁴⁷ Successful reconstruction and reconciliation work was also carried out through large-scale OSCE missions in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia.⁴⁸

However, despite its institutionalization during the 1990s, the CSCE/OSCE remained essentially a forum to facilitate cooperation among states. It lacked (and still lacks) the ability to resolve fundamental conflicts of interest between states or to impose its will on its member states. The largest CSCE/OSCE mission during this era was sent to Kosovo, but it proved relatively ineffective at preventing the exacerbation of tensions there.⁴⁹ Furthermore, quite a few conflicts in which CSCE/OSCE missions became involved – like in Moldova, Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh – remained frozen, where the most the CSCE/OSCE could claim credit for was a lack of any return to large-scale violence, but not a lasting political settlement.⁵⁰ Another problem has been inaction due to the inability of the participating member states to come to a consensus agreement that is necessary to initiate decisive action, or the inability to enforce agreements that were reached, such as regarding Russia's failure to withdraw its forces from Moldovan and Georgian territory, as it had promised to do at the Istanbul Summit of 1999.⁵¹ Moreover, the CSCE's/OSCE's peacekeeping capability that was authorized at the Helsinki Meeting in 1992 has never been used.⁵²

After the Cold War, the human basket/dimension of the CSCE/OSCE expanded substantially and came to focus on democratization. As in the sphere of conflict mediation, the CSCE/OSCE played a supportive role in post-communist democratization efforts, albeit not an insignificant one. Election monitoring

46 Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 125, 153; Hopmann, "An Evaluation," 234-235; Hopmann, "The OSCE role," 156.

47 Hopmann, "An Evaluation," 239-240; Hopmann, "The OSCE role," 158.

48 Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 154.

49 Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 161; Hopmann, "An Evaluation," 232-234; Hopmann, "The OSCE role," 155-156.

50 Hopmann, "The OSCE role," 159.

51 Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 139; Hopmann, "The OSCE role," 155; Kropatcheva, "Russia's OSCE Policy," 12.

52 Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 96.

became the key activity of the CSCE/OSCE in this sphere. The CSCE's 1990 Copenhagen Document called upon all CSCE participating states to permit observers from other CSCE states and NGOs to monitor their elections.⁵³ Between 1991 and 2004, the CSCE/OSCE organized 124 election monitoring missions, which made it the premier election monitoring institution in the world.⁵⁴ In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the OSCE went a step further by not just monitoring the elections, but actually supervising them.⁵⁵ Election monitoring did not stop fraud when regimes were intent on cheating, but they arguably made blatant fraud more costly for regimes, because the exposure of such fraud could seriously tarnish their legitimacy.⁵⁶ The OSCE also played an important role in democratization through the EU, because OSCE approval of elections was an important part of EU accession conditionality.⁵⁷

2.3 A gathering storm: 2000 to 2022

Geopolitical Context

While the early 2000s were still marked by some level of willingness in Moscow and Washington to cooperate in certain areas, the clearest one being counterterrorism following the attacks of 9/11, the overall momentum seemed to go out of the relationship, with increasing apprehension and downright distrust creeping in.

The US post-9/11 War on Terror slowly transformed into the “defence and spread of democracy in the world,”⁵⁸ much to Russia’s chagrin. Europe was undergoing its own profound developments, which included the introduction of the Euro and the “big-bang” expansion of the European Union in 2004.

Russia, meanwhile, was regaining its footing after the chaotic 1990s, under the new leadership of Vladimir Putin, whose first years in power were marked by a

53 Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 56.

54 Judith G. Kelley, *Monitoring Democracy: When International Election Observation Works, and Why It Often Fails* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 34-35.

55 Kelley, *Monitoring Democracy*, 69; Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 127.

56 Dunay, *The OSCE in Crisis*, 55-56.

57 Kelley, *Monitoring Democracy*, 148.

58 William H. Hill, *No Place for Russia: European Security Institutions since 1989*, Columbia University Press, 2018, p. 179,

focus on domestic issues, ranging from the dysfunctional bureaucracy and power struggle against Russia's oligarchs, to counterterrorism and the second Chechen War. As the domestic situation slowly stabilised, however, Moscow's attention was drawn increasingly to its near abroad, where a number of former Soviet countries were undergoing major changes.

With the so-called "colour revolutions" of Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) a new dynamic seemed to emerge in this region. The demands of the protestors for more government accountability, the rule of law, transparency and combating corruption, resonated widely with many European politicians and US global democracy promotion. In Russia, however, there was apprehension and concern with what the Kremlin saw as Western interference in regional affairs, which led to a further souring of Russian attitudes *vis-à-vis* ODIHR and the overall OSCE focus on the human dimension. The notion of Russia as a besieged fortress increasingly took hold in the Kremlin and beyond, and the idea of creeping Western dominance in what Moscow considered its exclusive sphere of influence was only strengthened by the opposing positions on the US placement of anti-missile defence systems in Central and Eastern Europe (see below).

Throughout this period, both Russia and the West began consolidating their positions and looking at the expansion of certain organisations, in which they could play a dominant role themselves. The EU and NATO pursued this through their openness to enlargement, including with an eye to the post-Soviet states. Russia, in turn, expanded its focus from a mostly internal one during the 1990s, towards increasing attention to its "near abroad", culminating in the creation of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2002 and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015.

After years of deteriorating relations with catalysts like the Russo-Georgian War and Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008, it all came to a head with the 2013 Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine and its aftermath. The protests that erupted following President Yanukovich's last-minute refusal to sign the planned Association Agreement with the EU were seen in Moscow as one more example of Western meddling. Only this time, it concerned a country of exceeding symbolic and economic importance to Russia. The following annexation of Crimea and military involvement in parts of the Donbas region, exacerbated by the tragedy of the downing of flight MH17 in July 2014, marked an important shift in the dynamics of the relationship between Russia and the West. But while shock over the Kremlin's actions reverberated throughout

Western capitals and permeated the rhetoric of Western politicians, leading to consecutive sanction packages, it did not result in a definitive shift of the paradigm of Russian-Western relations. Although their positions were clearly diverging, economic relations persisted, as did political contacts. The more drastic change came with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which marked a watershed moment in the Western attitude towards Russian actions. In parallel with additional sanctions, political relations were largely frozen and economic relations drastically reduced, including in the previously all-important energy relations, in an attempt to isolate Russia on the world stage. This forced the Kremlin to intensify its comprehensive geopolitical reorientation towards the East (with a major focus on China) and the (global) South. As of the time of this writing, further developments depend largely on the outcomes of the war in Ukraine, while the West struggles with the uncomfortable questions of the desirable and/or acceptable outcomes of that war, the nature and price of the necessary support for Ukraine and how it will affect Western political audiences, and the question of Ukraine's membership of Western structures like the EU and NATO in the midst of an ongoing military conflict.

A similar trend of general deterioration can be observed concerning arms control. In 2002 the US and Russia signed the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT), which was intended to significantly reduce the number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads, but was criticised for being too vague and lacking in adequate compliance measures⁵⁹. In that same year, the US withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) which had been signed with the USSR in 1972. In 2007 US plans to place anti-missile interceptors in Poland and the Czech Republic angered Moscow, which saw them as a direct threat to its security despite US assurances that they were intended to deal with potential threats from Iran and North Korea. As a result of the attempted "reset" of the US-Russian relationship in 2009, the countries signed the New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) in 2010, meant to replace the first START that expired the year before, committing them to further diminishing their strategic offensive arsenals. However, critics note that the verification mechanisms of the New START are significantly weaker than those in the initial version⁶⁰. Under President Trump the US withdrew from the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF)

59 Arms Control Association, [The Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty \(SORT\) At a Glance | Arms Control Association](#), October 2022.

60 Rose Gottenmoeller, [The New START Verification Regime: How Good Is It? | Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#), Carnegie Endowment, May 21, 2020.

Treaty in 2019 and the 1955 Open Skies Treaty in 2020. While the New START was extended by five years in 2021, as of the time of this writing Russia is refusing to engage in talks on a new nuclear arms control framework, tying it to a broader discussion of the security architecture in Europe⁶¹. At the same time, the (near) future may bring some changes in the broader dynamic of US-Russia relations, depending on the foreign policy objectives of the US Trump administration. While at the time of this writing there seems to be an opening for closer communication between the two great powers, it is difficult to predict how this will develop and what effect it will have on Europe's global position and security architecture.

The OSCE amid diverging (geo)political views

By the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, the OSCE was rapidly becoming a large institution with structural rules and procedures and a growing bureaucratic basis at its headquarters in Vienna. In addition to the increasing weight and activities of OSCE institutions like the ODIHR and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the organisation was heavily involved in field missions in various countries in the region. These included missions dedicated to conflict prevention or resolution (e.g. Georgia, Moldova, Macedonia); missions aimed at assisting the transition from Soviet to independent rule (e.g. Estonia and Latvia) and missions specifically established in the Balkans following the wars in Bosnia and Croatia and the NATO war in Kosovo⁶².

The OSCE also remained an important international forum for questions of European security, that includes both the US and Russia. The relationship between Russia and the West, in turn, remained key, not only in the global geopolitical dynamics, but also within the OSCE, and affected much of the organisation's thinking and activities. One continuous bone of contention entailed what Moscow saw as an overemphasis on the (intra-state) human dimension of democracy and human rights, while Russia saw more value in cooperation on issues of hard security and interstate conflict resolution. The OSCE's presence and activities in what Russia considers its "near abroad" were increasingly experienced as irritants by Moscow, including the already mentioned role that the OSCE/ODIHR evaluations of elections played in the ensuing "colour revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan.

61 For a full timeline: Council on Foreign Relations, [Timeline: U.S.-Russia Nuclear Arms Control](#).

62 William H. Hill, *No Place for Russia: European Security Institutions since 1989*, Columbia University Press, 2018, p.187.

Against the backdrop of the larger geopolitical processes of expansion and consolidation of international platforms and organisations throughout both Eastern Europe/Eurasia and the West, the OSCE's role seemed to be declining.⁶³ It underwent an erosion as a platform for dialogue on security in Europe, with increasingly low levels of mutual trust and genuine conversation. As noted by Zellner, between 2000 and 2013 “deepening contradictions and tensions led to the stagnation of the OSCE and its activities.”⁶⁴ It was unable to prevent the escalation that led to the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, despite its long-term presence on the ground and attempts at mediation. The Corfu Process, launched within the OSCE in 2009 in an attempt to restart a dialogue within the organisation on European security, petered out without bringing about results that would sufficiently satisfy all parties involved.

With the 2014-2015 crisis in Ukraine the OSCE seemed on paper to be the ideal organisation to deal with the various aspects of the situation on the ground. And for a fleeting moment, it was. It brought together all relevant parties, and had by this time ample experience with facilitating processes crucial to de-escalation, like mediation and ceasefire monitoring. The organisation thus became actively involved first in the mediation efforts between the Ukrainian President Yanukovich and the protesters of Euromaidan, and later on between Russia and Ukraine in the so-called Minsk-I and Minsk-II processes. In parallel it deployed a Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine in 2014, in the context of the developing conflict, which was then active throughout the Minsk I and Minsk II periods. In the end, however, the OSCE was unable to prevent an escalation, or mediate an effective and durable peace. Again the primacy of political relations (or the lack thereof) for the functioning of the organisation took its toll. While obstructionism or less than cooperative attitudes have never been exclusively Russia's domain, with various other countries also engaging in such behaviour to achieve certain goals or concessions, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 became a watershed moment for the relationship between Russia and the West, with major consequences for the OSCE's functioning. The OSCE became paralysed by the ensuing hostile standoff and the unwillingness of the participating States to cooperate on even the most trivial issues.

63 Elena Kropatcheva, “The Evolution of Russia's OSCE Policy: From the Promises of the Helsinki Final Act to the Ukrainian Crisis”, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 23, no. 1 (2015), 13.

64 Wolfgang Zellner, *Using the OSCE More Effectively: Ideas and Recommendations*, unpublished paper for the Federal Foreign Service, Institute For Peace Research and Security Policy (November 2020).

The OSCE's role in what has been a gradual deterioration of the crucial relationship between Russia and the West can be summarised as one of (an attempted) facilitation of contacts and mediation, and not active conflict resolution. While the importance of providing a platform for contacts and mediation should not be underestimated, especially as the OSCE has increasingly become the only regional organisation to provide it at all, its potential success very much depends on the political will of the parties to actually reach any kind of agreement. With the absence of such a will or motivation following Russia's military aggression towards Ukraine, it has proven practically impossible for the OSCE to play any significant role in bringing hostilities to an end or reaching comprehensive and durable political solutions to conflicts.

The OSCE and its instruments

While, during the preceding periods, the OSCE had been establishing new instruments and institutions or expanding existing ones, the new millennium was marked mainly by their consolidation and a gradual turn to stagnation. As the political/military dimension became more and more difficult to manoeuvre or agree upon due to the growing divergence between Russia and the West, the human dimension grew in comparative importance and size. This dimension was manifested through a number of prominent features. One such feature pertains to the OSCE election observers' missions, a highly visible part of the OSCE toolkit, having become a fixture during the conduct of elections across the OSCE region. Another important example was the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, a unique format for discussions centring around issues of democracy and human rights among the OSCE participating states⁶⁵.

The growing prominence of the human dimension and the related discussions and activities supporting independent journalists, human rights activists and others, soon became problematic for Russia in the context of its divergence from the Western liberal-democratic value system. As Moscow began to push against such initiatives, or to contaminate the formats with its own unconstructive actors, other participating states began to increasingly circumvent the problem. This entailed setting up mechanisms whereby projects were financed by (groups of) individual participating states but implemented through OSCE structures and/or staff, to support discussions and initiatives centring on the defence of

⁶⁵ The Human Dimension Implementation meetings have not been held after 2019, due to an inability to come to a consensus with Russia on holding these meetings.

democracy, human rights and the actors fighting for them. Russia, while being unable to block such initiatives completely, would nevertheless consistently continue its strong opposition to them, sometimes along with a number of other countries that were also less than keen on prioritising the human dimension.

In the meantime, Russia increasingly instrumentalised OSCE rules and procedures, using the consensus principle, to hamper initiatives that it perceived as going against its interests or worldview. Correspondingly, the OSCE executive structures had increasing difficulties in implementing their mandates and using their tools. Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Moscow's belief that the OSCE is too focused on the human dimension has only intensified within a larger context of the crystallisation of the Kremlin's worldview⁶⁶. As a result, Russia has often blocked not only projects and initiatives within the human dimension, but also decisions on the organisation's core budget, as well as its chairpersonship and other issues that are crucial to the OSCE's functioning as an organisation.

Despite this negative trend, it is important to note that some positive results were still observable throughout this period. OSCE field missions continued to function and remained prominent among the organisation's activities. Although some missions closed or were downgraded in this period, the OSCE deployed (or continued) missions to many countries across the region, including to various Balkan countries, Eastern Europe and South Caucasus. Some concrete positive examples of the OSCE's involvement are also noteworthy. One pertains to the OSCE's role throughout the Uzbek-Kyrgyz ethnic violence of 2010, where the organisation provided an early warning in the run-up to the crisis, actively assisted in settling tensions, raised awareness within the international community and played an active role in post-conflict rehabilitation⁶⁷. Another example is the OSCE's involvement in the Transnistria conflict settlement, where it was able to provide much-needed access to the left bank for other international organisations, timely diffuse potential escalations and set up projects of significance for further de-escalation, like disposing of large stores of ammunition left in Moldova after the Cold War.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, a crucial OSCE

66 Stephanie Liechtenstein, [Will Russia Kill the OSCE?](#), Foreign Policy, November 29, 2022.

67 Janyl Bokonbaeva, [OSCE Engagement in the Conflict Cycle in Kyrgyzstan](#), Security and Human Rights Monitor, June 2022.

68 William H. Hill, [The OSCE and the Moldova-Transnistria Conflict: Lessons in Mediation and Conflict Management](#), Security and Human Rights Monitor 24 (2013), p. 287-297.

characteristic still held true: progress was only possible when there was a clear political will on the part of the relevant parties to diffuse tensions or achieve tangible results, or at least a willingness not to act in an obstructive way. In cases where such political will was lacking, like the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 or Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine's East in 2014, the OSCE in the end was unable to achieve structural de-escalation or conflict resolution.

3 The OSCE's Future: three scenarios

Having looked at the OSCE's past, we will now embark on its potential future(s). The present chapter will sketch out three scenarios for the future of the OSCE and the consequences, in each scenario, for the organisation's effectiveness in implementing its tools and achieving its goals. The scenarios will use the historical background previously described as inspiration⁶⁹. It is important to note that while there may be certain parallels that 'rhyme' with the past, the historical background does not necessarily provide concrete examples of approaches that can be copy-pasted for future use. Rather, it is considered as useful input to help formulate a range of possibilities that can inform various developments within the scenarios.

As the OSCE's role and effectiveness is highly dependent on the geopolitical environment and power dynamics between the participating states, and most crucially, between Russia and the US and its allies, each scenario will begin by describing a specific geopolitical environment in which the given scenario is set. This will include some description of the situation concerning the war in Ukraine, as one of the decisive factors of the geopolitical dynamics between Russia and the West. This geopolitical picture will be followed by corresponding possibilities concerning the circumstances of the OSCE as an organisation, and the possible effectiveness of its tools.

3.1 Scenario I: containment and confrontation

Geopolitical environment

In this scenario the war in Ukraine drags on as an active military conflict, possibly interspersed with brief but unsuccessful ceasefires. Neither of the parties manages to achieve a convincing victory, or is willing to begin formal

⁶⁹ To fill in the various elements of the scenarios described in this paper, the authors drew inspiration from the following Clingendael report: Bob Deen & Niels Drost, [After Putin, the deluge?](#), Clingendael Institute, October 2023.

negotiations on substantive issues in good faith. Even with the ambiguity of the position of the US under President Trump, the arms race between Russia and the West intensifies with the European NATO allies increasing their share of support for Ukraine, and both sides become further entrenched in their positions.

The standoff between Russia and the West reaches its full force, with boundaries drawn between the two camps (Russia and its allies vs. the Western allies), which both try to lobby as many countries from other parts of the world as possible to join them. These third countries toe a pragmatic line in this division, pursuing their self-interest and transactional relationships, but are not generally convinced to fully join one of the two camps unless extraordinary events occur in their own political environments (internal politics and external relationships crucial to them) that push them in a specific direction.

International, multilateral organisations become battlegrounds for Russia and the West, platforms for the sides to clash, and in the process the organisations in question become more and more paralysed, especially when it comes to decision-making. In parallel, both camps strive to create their own alternative platforms and alliances of countries they consider (potential) friends or partners, or those they are trying to bind into their camp.

In the longer term, as the standoff drags on, Russia starts to feel the limits of its capacities. While it manages to some extent to reorient its economic focus towards the East and the (global) South, these partnerships are based on opportunism and the self-interest of the (new?) partners, which are fully aware of Russia's dire position and lack of options. First and foremost among these partners is China, and the Russian dependency on Beijing for any level of political and economic/trade backing continues to grow. In fact, Russia's focus on creating or strengthening international platforms that include China (but exclude the West) can also be seen as a coping mechanism in an attempt to mitigate some of the consequences of Russia's growing dependency on China.

Moscow is forced to make attractive offers to China and other partners that bring in less profits than its previous dealings with the Western markets, and Moscow never completely manages to replace those larger profits in full. Although in this way Russia is able to stave off the worst economic consequences through these new or newly intensified economic relationships in conjunction with sanction evasion, the diminished earnings lead to a gradual deterioration of the economic situation in Russia. Putin's regime becomes even more repressive

moving towards totalitarianism, motivated by a fear of instability and uprisings as a potential consequence of the deteriorating socio-economics.

The West, meanwhile, is dealing with increasing war fatigue among its domestic audiences and, as a partial consequence thereof, increasing divisions among Western allies with regard to the support for Ukraine. More populist and/or extreme right-wing leaders come to power in elections across the Western world, and while not all of them immediately or directly cease their support for Ukraine, some aim to do just that in the longer term. This increases the uncertainty in the geopolitical field on the question of alliances, geopolitical choices and other issues that used to be global certainties but now are not.

Russia's immediate surroundings (its "near abroad") become more volatile as the countries in question make differing choices and embark on increasingly divergent paths inspired – or necessitated – by Russia's overstretch. Some (attempt to) make clear geopolitical choices, sometimes forced to do so by their circumstances, but most continue trying to balance the various regional and world powers against each other, in order to obtain the best deals possible for their regimes and/or populations. The militarily and economically stronger countries in the region manifest their interests more assertively, to the detriment of regional stability and neighbourly relations. While Russia continues to prioritise its war effort in Ukraine, and the Western countries turn more and more inwards, the potential for tensions or even (armed) conflict elsewhere in the region increases.

The OSCE's position

The OSCE, just like any other international organisation that includes both Russia and the Western allies, is mostly paralysed in its decision-making, because of the entrenched and extreme differences between the two camps in terms of thinking, interests and outlook regarding the existing situation. The only initiatives that still stand a chance of being implemented are those financed through non-consensual mechanisms by individual participating states, which leads to decreasing cohesion within the organisation. The obstructionist Russian attitude, in combination with more inward-looking Western positions and a rise of authoritarianism in other OSCE participating States, lead to a deprioritisation of the OSCE as an international actor and an ever increasing lack of political will to achieve anything within the organisation. The very existence of the OSCE comes into question, as the outcomes of this scenario for the organisation range between complete paralysis and formal disbandment. An in-between option also

includes the possibility that Russia and/or other participating states decide to terminate their membership.

The OSCE and its instruments

In the geopolitical environment as described above, the OSCE is unable to effectively use many of its instruments, as there is no political will to participate in any genuine discussions, negotiations or mediation efforts on any subjects. There is also no agreement on field activities like monitoring missions, whether in the context of (potential) conflict resolution, or the human dimension (democracy, human rights etc.). Its executive structures are likely to have their budgets cut and mandates curtailed or even ended, thereby further eroding the organisation's effectiveness.

The OSCE however continues to be a unique platform on the European continent that brings together all conflicting (warring) parties. Even if no willingness can be perceived to make any headway during formal proceedings and meetings, there is the potential of informal encounters that can open space for some, more meaningful, track 1.5 or track 2 communication in the long run. The OSCE as an organisation can use this space not only to keep some genuine communication channels open on various levels, but also potentially to use them in the context of preventing unintended escalations, by tackling possible misconceptions or miscommunication between the parties⁷⁰.

As Zellner argues, “the OSCE has always been a framework that paves the way for important decisions via informal talks”⁷¹. While the exact impact of this informal function is difficult to gauge, in the environment as described in this scenario its importance is heightened. The informal communication channels can be used to pave the way and make the necessary preparations to form a mutual understanding in the area of **hard security and arms control** in the mid to long term, once the geopolitical environment changes. Any progress on other subjects,

70 One note of caution, when it comes to informal talks, pertains precisely to one of the consequences of the informality of such communications. Informal discussions cannot practically involve all 57 participating states at once, and will thus necessarily see some more narrow groups emerge. It will take some diplomatic navigation to avoid the impression of exclusion when engaging in such talks, which could backfire in terms of organizational cohesion.

71 Wolfgang Zellner, “Using The OSCE More Effectively – Ideas And Recommendations”, unpublished paper for the *Federal Foreign Office*, Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy, November 2020

especially those within the field of the human dimension, remains unrealistic and unattainable, with the exception of the participating states that are intrinsically interested in this dimension.

In addition to the facilitation of such informal contacts and communication, the OSCE can remain a platform that allows for smaller states to seek contact and communication with others, including the greater powers, which they may normally not encounter on such a regular basis.

3.2 Scenario II: Détente 2.0

Geopolitical environment

After a prolonged conflict, the war in Ukraine has become a quagmire of static frontlines with neither party achieving any significant results. There is a great amount of war fatigue in both Russia and the West that saps the motivation of both sides to sustain the level of ambition and active involvement in the conflict, and a nearing exhaustion of resources in Ukraine, as Western support dwindles to a trickle. President Trump enforces a cessation of hostilities through pressure on both sides, but the root causes of the war remain unaddressed. The conflict becomes, in effect, frozen, with occasional skirmishes and both sides exchanging fire along the frontlines. The outcomes of this scenario for Ukraine range between a freezing of the frontlines, whereby Russia retains control of most (if not all) of the Donbass and Crimea, to increasing Russian occupation outside these territories. The latter outcome, in turn, may vary between incremental advances along the frontlines, to some more major advances that result in the occupation of one or more of the cities considered crucial for Ukraine's survival as an economically and politically viable state⁷².

In this scenario, Russia and the West will have become mired in their standoff, while on both sides a great level of conflict fatigue can be observed. As the motivation for armed conflict in Ukraine or elsewhere is diminishing on both sides, there is some space for a minimal amount of communication and cooperation on a certain limited number of issues. At the same time there is no readiness for a comprehensive resolution and compromise that would bring the

72 These would in any case entail Kyiv, Odessa, Dnipro and Kharkiv.

parties significantly closer to a peace treaty on Ukraine or a reset in political and economic relations between Russia and the West.

In the above conditions Russia and the West begin cautious discussions on subjects that both prioritise: mainly hard security and arms control and preventing a direct military confrontation between Russia and NATO. Issues of the human dimension are understood to be off limits, as neither side exhibits any wish to compromise thereon. There is also an understanding in the West that pushing too hard on the human dimension could result in the budding dialogue on hard security coming to a halt. On the Russian side, the willingness to engage in talks on at least some subjects is motivated by a desire for a reprieve that would allow Russia to replenish its (economic, military) stocks and consider its further options.

The OSCE's position

With the above change in mood, the OSCE can partly reinvigorate its role as a platform for and a facilitator of contacts and dialogue. In this case, that dialogue is limited to questions of hard security and arms control. While the OSCE can use its instruments to provide the necessary conditions for this process, the more decisive factor remains the amount of political will that the parties will exhibit throughout the entire process. The OSCE serves solely as a platform and/or facilitator, and has no normative role. The mutual distrust and uncertainty over the sincerity of the parties to reach actual durable agreements forms a major challenge. With the emergence of a vested interest on both sides for the budding dialogue on hard security to succeed, Russia's position within the OSCE becomes somewhat less obstructionist when it comes to the general functioning of the organisation. This opens up some (more) space for decision-making on an organisational level, and projects and activities in third countries.

The OSCE and its instruments

Through its instruments geared towards **political/military arms control** the OSCE sets about the core task of preventing East-West confrontation and mitigating the arms race and security dilemma. In this, it can use its ample experience with **mediation** and **negotiation** processes to provide the necessary space and facilitation for Russia and the West to discuss questions of security and arms control. The OSCE is also well placed to conduct any **monitoring** activities that may emerge from this process, should the parties reach any agreements. Activities within the **human dimension**, while not realistic in the Russian context, are still possible in relation to some third countries that do exhibit a readiness

to work on democratic development and human rights. As part of the human dimension, the civil societies of various participating states play an important role in activities (where possible) and dialogue. Finally, the avenues that the OSCE can provide to facilitate **informal dialogue** are also strengthened.

3.3 Scenario III: Geopolitical Convergence⁷³

Geopolitical environment

Following an unexpected turn of events, President Putin is replaced by a new leadership that is highly motivated to at the very least undo some of the most serious damage to Russia's economic and geopolitical standing as a result of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and at most launch Russia's reaffirmation of and a return to the OSCE commitments. As a consequence, there is a softening of the regime in all directions. Reforms are launched within Russia, mainly geared towards boosting economic development through more liberal economic policies. These necessitate an easing of the political regime as well, which follows suit. Russia's foreign policy loses its sharpest edges, and the Kremlin creates an opening for talks on Ukraine as it wishes to bring some kind of resolution to the crisis that would allow for the Western sanctions to be lifted. While the possibilities regarding the end-state of the Ukraine war remain unclear for some time to come⁷⁴, this willingness does create the necessary space and opportunity for an eventual reconciliation between Russia and the West, and there is a genuine political will on both sides to achieve tangible results. It is important to note that this convergence is driven by strictly pragmatic considerations on the Russian side. The idea of an ideological convergence, as experienced in the early 1990s, is unlikely, as Russia is a vastly different country compared to that period. Moscow is expected to retain much of its apprehension vis-à-vis the West as an important economic and geopolitical challenger, its worldview of great power competition that essentially grants less sovereignty to smaller states, and its focus on conservative values that it contrasts with a supposedly decadent, liberal West.

73 It should be noted that the authors consider this scenario to be the least likely. Nevertheless, they consider it worthwhile to keep the possibility of such developments in mind, in order to sketch the limits of even the most positive of scenarios.

74 Some issues, like Crimea or the question of reparations, are likely to remain major bones of contention irrespective of the nature of the regime in place in Moscow.

These general developments have a number of consequences in global geopolitical dynamics. As the Russia vs. the West standoff eases, the paradigm shifts increasingly to a China vs. West dynamic, where Russia tries to balance a resetting of its relationship with the West against efforts to preserve its relatively positive rapport with China while not becoming too dependent on it either. The West now has its full attention on China, which is perceived as the next major threat to the rules-based order.

Within multilateral international organisations the tension that had been brought about by the West vs. Russia standoff now also eases, opening some space for (more) effective cooperation and decision-making.

In this scenario there are several possibilities for the development of the war in Ukraine, as developments related to the war are not the decisive factor or trigger of events in this case, but the war itself is greatly influenced by developments elsewhere; mainly within Russia itself. The war in Ukraine finds itself either in a more or less frozen/quagmire state (see scenario 2) for a brief period of time, that soon afterwards turns towards a path to some form of peaceful resolution, or a situation whereby the domestic developments in Russia lead to an unmotivated or unstable Russian front in Ukraine that results in a successful push by the Ukrainian forces to secure at least a partial victory. In this scenario, any future Ukraine membership of international political (EU) or military (NATO) alliances would not be subject to negotiations with Russia.

The OSCE's position

As the new Russian leadership becomes more amenable to once again upholding OSCE commitments and the West again becomes interested in a genuine dialogue, the OSCE finds itself empowered and reinvigorated. The organisation is better able not only to engage in more effective decision-making on procedural issues and initiatives throughout the three dimensions, but also to restart normative discussions on the future of the security architecture in Europe and the values embodied in the Helsinki Final Act. Discussions on a wide range of topics now become possible, with a willingness on both sides to at least engage in such talks, and even reach certain agreements. While Russia may not be intrinsically motivated to move closer to the West in terms of its ideological worldview regarding the values of liberal democracy, as mentioned above, it may be motivated by pragmatic incentives to accept some degree of the liberalisation of its internal and/or external policies.

The OSCE's instruments

Although other, smaller participating states occasionally still resort to obstructionist behaviour, with Russia's turn towards cooperation the overall atmosphere within the OSCE sees a positive transformation as well. With the emerging space for more meaningful dialogue and discussion within the OSCE, the organisation can use a wide range of its instruments in its efforts to bring about a more coherent vision of European security and values. First and foremost this includes **the political/military dimension** and arms control. It furthermore entails not only preventing direct East-West military confrontation, but also establishing additional checks and agreements and/or procedures meant to prevent future escalations, with both sides having a vested interest in attaining tangible results.

In addition to the already mentioned emergence of space – and a desire – for **conflict resolution** regarding the war in Ukraine, there is a willingness for broader cooperation on de-escalating (potential) tensions elsewhere in the region, which has emerged as a result of the shifting power balance in what Russia considers its “near abroad”. This potentially opens up long-lasting frozen conflicts like Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia to a definitive resolution. While such discussions – especially on Ukraine – are expected to remain exceedingly difficult, in the meantime the parties are able to come to some agreement on issues of **monitoring** and **incident prevention** while the talks last, in order to provide for some level of stability.

Finally, with the budding rapprochement between Russia and the West the **human dimension** makes a reappearance as a theme that the parties are more willing to discuss and work on. While major differences on values and worldview persist, some space emerges to engage in dialogue on topics like democracy and human rights, with some openings on the Russian side to consider possible adjustments and reforms in return for the right incentives.

4 Conclusions

Having looked at the past and present of the OSCE, as well as possible paths towards the future, a number of conclusions can be drawn.

First, the OSCE's effectiveness as an organisation is highly dependent on the geopolitical context and political will of the participating states. These interrelated conditions are outside the OSCE's own control and are largely a function of the dynamic of the relationship between Russia and the West. Although a Russian cooperative attitude is no guarantee for effectiveness and there are (many) more countries within the OSCE that can obstruct – and have obstructed – proceedings, the way in which the Russian-Western relationship develops will nevertheless be the most important and decisive factor determining the overall atmosphere within the organisation. It is important to note here that in the coming years this relationship, as well as the question of cohesion among the Western allies, may undergo certain changes and/or turmoil, depending on the – as yet unclear – policies of the newly elected Trump administration in the US towards the European allies, Russia and the OSCE, combined with the potential outcomes of Europe's (budding) internal debate on European security.

Second, in any scenario the OSCE remains one of the options on a broader menu of international organisations that can be utilized as an instrument for peace and stability, and it is important to keep that option on the menu. Even if its possibilities are temporarily limited, its unique characteristics and instruments may be in demand in the future. Some of the now largely abandoned tools in the political-military dimension, like the Open Skies Treaty or the CFE, could help to diffuse the security dilemma between Russia and the West but cannot be easily reactivated without significant modernization. Executive structures, in particular the autonomous institutions (ODIHR, HCNM and RFoM), field operations and human dimension instruments, often experience significant pressure on their mandates and budgets that may hamper their ability to respond when called upon.

Third, considering the OSCE's core characteristics, in particular its dependence on consensus among a large number of participating States, the organisation can hardly be expected to resolve protracted conflicts on its own. It is, however, ideally placed to provide the necessary platforms to facilitate negotiations, monitoring and the verification of agreements. In other words, the OSCE is unable to ensure the signing of a peace treaty, but it could play an important role in what happens next.

5 Recommendations

With the preceding conclusions in mind, a number of recommendations can be made. We will divide these into several categories: General Recommendations are future-proof policy options that can and should be implemented in any case, irrespective of further geopolitical developments. The other recommendations are more responsive in nature and will be linked to the three scenarios of geopolitical developments described above.

General Recommendations

- *Communicate clearly* what the OSCE is, and more crucially, what it is not. The idea that the OSCE is not by itself able or equipped to resolve conflicts is not one that is understood clearly and widely outside the organisation. Such misconceptions lead to unrealistic expectations, which inevitably lead to disappointment, disillusionment and cynicism among the wider public and national political circles. This, in turn, can preclude the political prioritisation of the organisation by national governments, which is crucial for the OSCE's survival and functionality.
- *Draw lessons from the past and prepare for the future.* In one way or another, the war in Ukraine will end one day. This is when the OSCE can contribute its greatest value, in facilitating what happens next. The OSCE should prepare for “the day after” and consider various scenarios and its role in each of them. As part of such preparations the OSCE should thoroughly analyse past practices and draw its lessons. One such lesson, for instance, pertains to any new monitoring mission to Ukraine, which would have to be more robust than the 2014 SMM and learn from the shortcomings of such earlier missions. Another aspect of preparing for the future is to consider the role that new technologies, such as AI, may play in any needs the OSCE may want to fulfil, like monitoring and verification.
- *Focus on risk reduction.* However the developments may unfold, one element will remain crucial as well as feasible, as it extensively builds on informal contacts: risk reduction. Depending on the scenario the goals can vary from implementing procedures and contacts to avoid unintended escalations, to reaching comprehensive agreements on arms reduction and monitoring.
- *Survive until better times and retain institutional knowledge.* The value of the OSCE will only really increase if and when the geopolitical environment is more conducive to cooperation. Make sure that the organisational structure

persists in an era of lacking political will and prioritisation by the participating states, until there are such changes in the geopolitical environment that allow for more. In the meantime, find ways to retain a sufficient level of the knowledge and experience present within the OSCE, even under conditions of staff rotations, in order to hit the ground running once it is needed.

- *Be creative.* Identify all and any issues of common interest for the participating states, even if they have widely differing perspectives. Facilitate talks and processes relevant to those issues, and use that space to probe other subjects or avenues that could lead to a wider range of discussions, even if in the (distant) future. This also involves sensitivity to niche subjects in which autonomous OSCE institutions (ODHIR, HCNM, RFoM) can play a valuable role.

Recommendations for Scenario 1: Containment and confrontation

- *Continue to make use of any of the instruments still available.* Among these, do not underestimate the importance of the informal contacts the OSCE facilitates, but do not overestimate them either. These contacts are not a goal in and of themselves; ideally they should lead to results, even if those, for now, are far off. As for more specific initiatives, it is important to continue implementing projects in countries that may still be open to democratic transformation, conflict mitigation or monitoring. In addition, risk reduction and deterrence could be helped by a measure of openness, e.g. providing information on military exercises etc.
- *Positioning.* Once the war in Ukraine comes to an end, any deals that are negotiated and reached would need credible security arrangements, like robust monitoring and verification. Even if a leading role for the OSCE may prove to be too ambitious, it is important to position the organisation for a possible supporting role in the implementation of any political agreements. Beyond the war in Ukraine, there may also be possibilities for the OSCE to take on a more leading role in the smaller (frozen) conflicts (e.g. Transnistria, Abkhazia etc.), as few, if any, other international organisations are present in these geographical and political spaces.

Recommendations for Scenario 2: Détente 2.0

- *Empower the OSCE if and when possible.* A number of OSCE instruments could be preserved in a meaningful way even when faced with difficult realities. It would be important, however, to equip them with sufficient mandate independence and funding. This includes the autonomous institutions (HCNM, ODIHR, RFoM), field presences and the informal OSCE

mechanisms at the OSCE's disposal, like its convening power, if not for meaningful conversations among official government representatives then at least among experts and civil society (track 2). Preserving these instruments may allow results to be sought even during times with limited possibilities.

- *Continue working with those that are willing to cooperate.* By continuing to work with participating states that are still open to cooperation and organizing meetings and broader interaction with civil society actors and other external experts, the OSCE can ensure some level of continuous cooperation, discussion and meaningful exchanges. Some of these states (e.g. Kazakhstan) could even be considered in terms of their potential to act as a bridge towards Russia.

Recommendations for Scenario 3: Geopolitical convergence

- *Be ambitious.* As the space for dialogue and cooperation increases along with the political will of major actors to reach agreements, it is important for the OSCE to make maximum use of this opportunity. This includes not only facilitating the ensuing talks and negotiations, but also pushing for a comprehensive discussion on the future of the security architecture in Europe. The goal should be to establish checks, balances and procedures to try and avoid the kinds of confrontation that have occurred during the past two decades.
- *Reform.* This scenario is the only one in which room opens up for a constructive discussion on the future of the OSCE itself. This should lead to an open dialogue on possible reforms within the OSCE, including its fundamental principles – like the principle of consensus, but also issues related specifically to budget policy – so as to ensure the organisation's effective functioning during potential future crises. Any reforms will be difficult, even in the most positive scenario, but this scenario is the one that allows for relevant discussions with any potential for positive results.