

Between Multilateralism and Great Power Competition: The Future of European Indivisible and Comprehensive Security

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Abstract

Even before the Russian war against Ukraine, strategists and academics in the West argued and even pleaded for a return to Great Power Competition. This interest reflected a growing conviction that the era of internationalist multilateralism was over and that the world is divided in two rival blocs, i.e., the Europeans and Americans on the one hand, and Russia and China on the other. In this view, Ukraine is the first battleground between these blocs. However, multilateralism and multi-polarity are alive and kicking. Not only that, international organisations such as the UN, NATO, the Council of Europe, the OCSE and CSTO, are indispensable. This is especially so when relations between member states have become tense. They provide norms, facilitate the exchange of ideas and as such help diffuse tensions that may have risen among their members. To substantiate our claim, we will discuss the establishment of the European security architecture and show how ideas that underlay it, are still meaningful, if only because Russia, especially in defeat, is still a force to be reckoned with.

Keywords: Democracy, The rule of law, Cooperative security, Confidence and security building measures, European security architecture

1. Introduction

It is often said that this is an age of Great Power Competition, exemplified by Russian aggression against Ukraine (2004, 2014 and 2022) and Georgia (2008), China's Belt Road Initiative and its assertive posture against what it considers its breakaway province of Taiwan, and American unilateralism. Great Power Competition is not only a descriptive term, it has normative traits as well; even before the Russian war against Ukraine, several western strategists and academics advocated a return to Great Power Competition, and away from internationalist multilateralism. They held that there were clear analogies with the situation during the late 19th century, when Russia and Britain were engaged in the so-called Great Game, and Germany made what was seen as a bid to achieve world hegemony. Multilateralism was

deemed to be passé. Instead, the world is divided into two rival blocs, i.e., the Europeans and Americans on the one hand, and Russia and China on the other. In this view, Ukraine is the first battleground between these blocs, and Taiwan may soon be next.

This contribution, however, will challenge the central premise of this alleged renewed Great Power Competition. Rather than dead and buried, multilateralism and multi-polarity are alive and kicking. Not only that, international organisations such as the United Nations, NATO, the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), are indispensable. This is especially so when relations between member states have become tense. They provide norms and facilitate the exchange of ideas and as such help diffuse tensions that may have risen among their members. To substantiate our claim, we will discuss the establishment of the European security architecture. We will show how ideas that underlay it, i.e., that security is indivisible and comprehensive, are still meaningful, if only because Russia is still a force to be reckoned with. Perhaps paradoxically, this is even more so if Ukraine manages to defeat it. First, we will discuss the theoretical state of research on the concepts of great power competition versus multilateralism, together with the presumed agency of international organisations. Additionally, we will dwell on the development of the European security architecture, inspired by Roosevelt's 'One World' concept but born and raised during the Cold War. Lastly, we will discuss its relevance against the background of the war in Ukraine.

2. Great power competition versus multilateralism: Agency of international organisations in a world of great power politics

The war in Ukraine stoked up the long-running battle of ideas between the liberal and realist schools of thought in the field of international relations. One of the sharpest debates between them centred around the question of whether or not international institutions really mattered. Duffield, among others, claimed the importance of international institutions,¹ whereas Mearsheimer and others questioned their authority, autonomy and relevance.² The latter argued that the international political arena is in a state of anarchy. It is characterised by competition in search of survival, and power and conflict rather than stability and rules enforced by international organisations, dominate international politics. In this view organisations are wholly and existentially dependent upon the will of

¹ Duffield, "What are international institutions?" 1–22.

² Mearsheimer, "The false promise of international institutions," 5–49.

states. According to realism states are not influenced or ruled by any structural, coercive power other than themselves. International organisations are no more than empty shells or impersonal policy machinery manipulated by state actors. As there is no overarching central authority, realist literature treats cooperation in the security and defence domain as purely intergovernmental or even ad-hoc cooperation that occurs solely for the purposes of forwarding the self-interest of the state.³ According to realism international security and defence cooperation, often labelled as ‘high politics,’ lies at the heart of the state, where state sovereignty rules. With regard to the organisations of the European security architecture, they point at the requirement that within the OSCE, NATO and the EU Common Security and Defence Policy decision making on missions, operations, and enlargement, is unanimous, which they maintain, is a clear expression of national sovereignty.

In sharp contrast, Duffield and others maintain that states do not operate in an anarchical system. They cooperate. They are linked and connected with each other through for instance agriculture or transport policy.⁴ While these scholars acknowledge that decision-making in crucial fields is unanimous, notable liberalism school adherents argue that sovereignty itself has never been a fixed concept. It varies in degree and form.⁵ Ever since the end of the Cold War international cooperation has increased and has taken various forms between states and organisations, a phenomenon that Howorth labelled ‘intergovernmental-supranationalism.’ Strikingly, in the security and defence domain this has resulted in a shift away from the traditional concept of sovereignty.⁶ Sovereign equality, a key characteristic of states, is not absolute, and hasn’t been for some time. For instance, article 8 of the Council’s Statute, adopted in 1949, gives the Council of Europe organisation the right to suspend members and this article was invoked to expel the Russian Federation after its aggression against Ukraine.⁷ Furthermore, EU and NATO member states increasingly engage in bi- and multilateral security and defence cooperation, witness the supranational Dutch/Belgian air force

³ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 1-2.

⁴ See: Krasner, ed., *International Regimes*; Keohane, “International institutions: Two approaches,” 379–96; Rittberger, ed., *Regime Theory and International Relations. The American Journal of International Law*.

⁵ For an elaboration on differentiated cooperation, see: Haftendorn, Keohane, and Wallender, *Imperfect Unions*, 7; Schimmelfennig, Leuffen, and Rittberger, “The European Union as a system of differentiated integration: Interdependence, politicization and differentiation,” 764–82; Bergmann and Müller, “Failing forward in the EU’s common security and defense policy: The integration of EU crisis management,” 1–19; Fiott, “In every crisis an opportunity? European Union integration in defence and the war on Ukraine,” 447–62.

⁶ Howorth, “Decision-making in security and defence policy: Towards supranational intergovernmentalism?”

⁷ See: Council of Europe, “European Treaty Series -No. 1.”

cooperation that has been in place since 1947. Finally, the recent integration of the Dutch land force component in a joint German/Dutch Corps that can be deployed by both NATO and EU is the most far-reaching defence cooperation between European states to date.

Especially after the end of the Cold War, this cooperation increased beyond ad-hoc bilateral cooperation into multilateral interaction involving policy coordination and sometimes institutionalisation.⁸ According to liberalism, states influence one another and formalise their relationships in agreements and treaties. And some of these agreements and treaties serve as administrations above states – supranational organisations – with regard to certain policy areas of national governments. States accept rules of an international organisation because they reduce insecurity, transaction costs as well as unpredictability.⁹ After all, the alternative, anarchy, is not attractive. Some of the rules like those inherent in the EU, are thus self-imposed; others are imposed by international organisations, by treaty, on member states, such as Article 5 of the North Atlantic treaty that created NATO. And in some cases, rules are applicable between international organisations, like the 2003 Berlin Plus agreement between NATO and EU's Common Security and Defence Policy.

In addition, some scholars argue that organisations have become independent actors themselves, because of the political or legal authority they possess or when state actors are not supported to act. Within the European security architecture, states have been willing to accept involvement from an international organisation like the UN and the OSCE¹⁰ that are regarded as more independent and inclusive, over involvement by individual states, such as the United States or Russia, or by organisations such as the EU and NATO. This is exemplified by the former presence of the OSCE in Transnistria (Moldova), Georgia and Nagorno Karabakh (Azerbaijan), where it engaged in either fact-finding or monitoring missions. Think also of the activities of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) in the Baltic states after they regained independence. International organisations are asked to act because of specific technical expertise, mandates, or knowledge, as, for instance, Frontex, that was tasked with defending the EU's borders and the fight against cross-border crime. Another example is the EU's central role in combatting Covid-19.

⁸ The concept of multilateralism has become commonly used, though the academic debate on multilateralism has been fragmented. For an elaboration on the development of the concept, see: Koops, *The European Union as an Integrative Power: Assessing the EU's "Effective Multilateralism" with NATO and the United Nations*, 66–78; Morse and Keohane, "Contested multilateralism," 385–412.

⁹ Hasenclever, Mayer, and Rittberger, *Theories of International Regimes*, 37.

¹⁰ The Cold War era Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe was institutionalised into the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) at the Budapest Summit, December 1994.

While overall cooperation between states in the security and defence domain remains mostly intergovernmental, traditional paradigms are shifting and it can be argued that organisations are more than just the sum of interstate cooperation. As a result of their mandate, expertise and capacities international organisations set the agenda in their policy domain and can compel states to comply: 'At times, international organizations may actually shape the policy preferences of states by changing what states want. It matters who initiates policy and why.'¹¹ Sometimes officials of such organisations are 'called in' as facilitators when stakes are high and solidarity between states is tense. These officials in turn give their organisation a face and a voice that carries beyond their formal roles. Examples of this include the high profiles of the head of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and of NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg since the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24th February 2022.¹² Accordingly, the partnership and enlargement programs of EU and NATO changed from engagement instead of enlargement, to a new willingness to enlarge. This is accompanied by debates about majority decision making and an increase of the EU budget in the defence domain, which had been unthinkable for years.¹³

Another area in which the two camps of theorists have clashed is over the causation of the war and how it should end. This is not just some bickering. According to scholars of realism the 'taproot of the current crisis is NATO expansion' and the only way out of the current war is a negotiated peace with Russia which involves Ukraine's recognition of the Russian annexation of parts of its territory in order to end the invasion.¹⁴ Their reasoning is that since Russia is a great power, the West should recognise and accommodate its security interests. Such an approach would help avoid the risk of Russia using nuclear weapons because as a great power, Russia cannot afford to lose.

According to liberalism, however, Russia's invasion in Ukraine is a profound violation of the UN Charter, which eliminates any chance of a diplomatic compromise. In this reasoning, diplomatic negotiations would not only reward Putin's war of aggression in Ukraine, it would also undermine the international rules-based order built on the territorial integrity and political independence of all UN states.¹⁵

¹¹ Barnett and Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics*, 10.

¹² Vanhoonacker and Pomorska, "The institutional framework," 67–90.

¹³ For example: In June 2022, the EU granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova. In May 2023 a 'group of friends,' nine EU member states including Germany and France, promoted a gradual shift from unanimity to qualified majority voting even within the foreign policy domain. The date of 2030 is foreseen to start with the first enlargement round with countries such as North Macedonia.

¹⁴ Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault: The liberal delusions that provoked Putin," 77–89.

¹⁵ Fukuyama, "Why Ukraine will win."

3. The genesis of the European security architecture, 1945-1992

The problem of how to deal with a humiliated great power is not new though. In fact, it lay at the root of attempts during the 20th century to create what we now call the European security architecture. A closer look at those past attempts might perhaps point to a way forward to a constellation in which both Russia's status as a great power can be confirmed, and Ukraine's existence as a sovereign state that is free to make its own foreign policy choices can be secured.

After the First World War, a war that resulted from late 19th century Great Power Competition, the victors put into place collective League of Nations security arrangements to restore order and stability in Europe. A recurrence of this competition, and the German desire to avenge the humiliating Versailles Treaty in particular, lay at the root of the Second World War. The victors in that war were united in their insistence that Germany would not be able to start a new war to redraw Europe's borders and power arrangements, but their inability to find a model that would suit their interests led to the creation of two German states and a division of the continent in two opposing blocs. This was effectively the death knell for the 'One World' concept that had been espoused by President Roosevelt and was embodied by the United Nations Organisation, which was crucially weakened as a consequence.

The division of Europe was problematic and unstable as it was based on two competing views of society and of security. Western Europe joined the American 'Empire-by-invitation' for protection,¹⁶ while the Eastern part of the continent was subjected to the Soviet Union's visions of progress, peace and security. While Western Europe reached levels of prosperity never seen before and opportunities for individual expression, the Soviet Union's sphere saw a bloody counterinsurgency in the areas annexed in 1939-1940 and again, in 1944-1945, consecutive waves of terror, persecution and repression, and ill-fated struggles for liberation.¹⁷ Under the leadership of Washington and Moscow the two blocs fought each other ideologically, politically, diplomatically and economically. In addition they fought a number

¹⁶ Lundestad, *The United States and Western Europe since 1945 from "Empire" by Invitation to Transatlantic Drift*.

¹⁷ See for instance: Snyder, *Bloodlands*; Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953: The Cold War, the German Question, and the First Major Upheaval behind the Iron Curtain*; Sebestyen, *Twelve Days: The Story of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution*; Malashenko, *Soviet Military Intervention in Hungary, 1956*; Lendvai, *One Day That Shook the Communist World: The 1956 Hungarian Uprising and Its Legacy*; Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*; Heinemann and Wiggershaus, *Das Internationale Krisenjahr 1956*; Gilbert, *Cold War Europe: The Politics of a Contested Continent*; Jankowiak, Rafał, and Reczek, 28 June 1956 in Poznań: *One of the First Months of Polish Freedom*.

of proxy wars. While today the Cold War is remembered with some nostalgia for its apparent stability, in fact the risk of nuclear escalation was never far off.

One of the fruits of the era of détente that was ushered in after the 1962 Cuba Crisis, however, was the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (1973-1975), the predecessor of today's OSCE. Originally, Moscow had intended to deny the USA and Canada a say in European security and force the conference to politically and legally sanction its hold over Eastern Europe, perhaps even including its right to militarily intervene wherever it saw fit.¹⁸ When the Helsinki Final Act was signed in August 1975, however, it reaffirmed existing international law by adopting ten guiding principles:

1. sovereign equality and respect for the rights inherent in sovereignty,
2. refraining from the threat or use of force
3. inviolability of frontiers
4. territorial integrity of states
5. peaceful settlement of disputes
6. non-intervention in internal affairs
7. respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief
8. equal rights and self-determination of peoples
9. cooperation among states
10. fulfilment in good faith of obligations under international law.¹⁹

In addition, the so-called Third Basket of the Accord contained obligations to improve what was termed 'the free flow of individuals, ideas and information' between societies and by implication, across the Iron Curtain. All in all, Moscow's state-centric view of security had been rejected in favour of the West-European premise that there could be no state security without human security, an idea that had been pioneered by the Council of Europe in the early 1950s.²⁰ Worse still, as CSCE developed into a 'process,' access to Western technology and investment became dependent on improvements in human rights behind the Iron Curtain. This, in turn, bolstered dissidence and oppositional activity in the Soviet sphere of

¹⁸ Wenger, Mastny, and Nuenlist, *Origins of the European Security System*.

¹⁹ OSCE, "Helsinki Final Act | OSCE," 5-10.

²⁰ A child of the Cold War, the Council of Europe was conceived as a union of anti-totalitarian states built on the rule of law and human rights and fundamental freedoms. Its member states had the right to file complaints about other signatories' treatment of their citizens. In addition, through the adoption, in the early 1950s, of the First Additional Protocol, individual citizens could – simply put – sue their states before the European Court. Cf. Baudet, "A statement against the totalitarian countries of Europe": Human rights and the early Cold War," 125-40.

influence. Furthermore, while Moscow had obtained acceptance that state borders were inviolable (which was hardly a major concession), the Final Act stipulated that they could be changed by mutual consent. Lastly, the principle of self-determination implied that peoples or citizens could choose their own political system. Gradually, in fact very gradually, CSCE developed into a set of shared norms.²¹ It did not cement the post-war order, as Moscow had intended. Instead, CSCE laid the framework to overcome it – in a peaceful way.²²

4. 'A Europe whole and free': The liberal school's heyday and its downfall

After the end of the Cold War the idea of a pan-European security order was launched. This order should be based on 'interlocking and mutually reinforcing organizations' as the phrase ran, and the idea of a division of labour between them. The Europe-wide CSCE/OSCE, the western organisations of NATO, Council of Europe and EU and the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States and its security organisation CSTO, each had their own roles to perform.²³ Captured by US President G.H.W. Bush as 'a Europe whole and free,' the whole of Europe would be governed by the concepts of the liberal world order and multilateralism, which should promote peace, stability and prosperity throughout the continent.²⁴ In November 1990, CSCE's Paris Charter outlined this inclusive pan-European framework based on a

²¹ This is illustrated best by the fact that in early 1989 the 'human dimension mechanism' was put into place, according to which *all* signatory states accepted the other signatories' right to express concern but also convene for consultations over human rights violations. Effectively it meant that the communist states had accepted the western concept of human security.

²² To be sure, there is much discussion about CSCE's role in ending the Cold War. Realist explanations attribute the end of communist rule in Eastern Europe to the *approchement* of the two hegemonies and arms limitation talks, whereas more structuralist explanations point at the role played by transnational networks, norms and the like. Recent literature includes: Morgan, *Final Act: The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War*; Westad and Villaume, *Perforating the Iron Curtain: European Détente, Transatlantic Relations, and the Cold War, 1965-1985*; Badalassi and Snyder, *The CSCE and the End of the Cold War*; Wenger, Vojtech Mastny, and Christian Nuenlist, *Origins of the European Security System*; Bange and Niedhart, *Helsinki 1975 and the Transformation of Europe*; Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism*; For a (small) state-centred approach, see: Baudet, "It was Cold War and we wanted to win": Human rights, 'Détente,' and the CSCE," 183-198.

²³ The Collective Security Treaty has its origins in the Soviet armed forces: these were replaced in 1992 by the United Armed Forces of the Commonwealth of Independent States. The arrangements involved developed into the CSTO.

²⁴ U.S. Diplomatic Mission to Germany, "President Bush. A Europe whole and free. Mainz. May 1989." The idea was further developed in NATO's 1991 strategic concept. "The Alliance's New Strategic Concept (1991)." NATO, 1991.

comprehensive and *indivisible* concept of security, shared values, and commitment to activate cooperation between its members. The CSCE transformed into OSCE. It is based upon the idea of peaceful settlement of disputes without the use of violence, as first outlined in the Helsinki Final Act's 5th Principle in 1975. *Indivisible security* then implies that security of one state cannot be won at the expense of another. *Comprehensive security* implies that security is not solely defined in military terms, but also includes economic, ecological and social factors.²⁵ It reflected a shift in security and defence thinking away from deterrence and defence toward confidence and security building measures, arms control, multilateral cooperation and, generally, a broader perspective on security centred around transparency with regard to each other's military capabilities.²⁶ This approach was built on mutual security reassurances through the establishment of mutual gains, consensus, political and military transparency, institutions, and rules.²⁷ OSCE is basically a system of cooperative security, and it does not oblige states to act against any aggressor.

As the 'primary instrument for early warning, conflict prevention and crisis management,' OSCE was mandated as the overall organisation for peacekeeping operations in the entire area from Anchorage to Vladivostok, as the phrase ran. The operations themselves could be executed by NATO, the Western Union and the then post-Soviet CIS.²⁸ To strengthen this security framework, Russia and NATO drew closer together, culminating in the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997. In the same period EU and NATO also engaged in formal relations.

From its inception, however, the new European security order was challenged by crises and conflict. Moscow accepted German reunification but had to grudgingly concede that Germany remained a NATO member. This grudge inspired an informal assurance on the part of the alliance that NATO forces and infrastructure would not move to the East,²⁹ an assurance that has guided US-Russia relations from the end of the Cold War until 2022; even with the establishment of eFP after 2014, NATO's presence in its eastern member states remained modest. In the 1990s, NATO also gave a 'no-first-use guarantee'³⁰ and both Russia and NATO committed verbally to strengthening the OSCE for a new balance in Europe.

A number of wars and crises, starting with the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991, saw NATO/the US and Russia on opposite sides which frustrated this development. Russia's participation in NATO-led I/SFOR in Bosnia from 1995 was professional

²⁵ OCSE, "The challenges of change."

²⁶ Carter, Perry, and Steinbruner, *A New Concept of Cooperative Security*.

²⁷ Zagorski, "The OSCE and cooperative security," 58–63.

²⁸ OCSE, "CSCE towards a genuine partnership in a new era."

²⁹ Sarotte, 1989: *The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe*.

³⁰ NATO, "The Alliance's New Strategic Concept (1991)."

though tense, and relations plummeted during NATO's war against Serbia (1999) and the dispute over Kosovo's legal status that followed it. Likewise, the unlawful American invasion of Iraq (2003) further alienated the Russians, and so did American plans for deployment of an anti-missile defense in Poland and the Czech Republic as they conflicted with Moscow's interpretation of the agreements made at the beginning of the nineties. For the West, trust in Russia was undermined by its handling of the first Chechen war (1995) and its counterinsurgency/counterterrorist campaign there.³¹ Its heavy-handed interference in Georgia and Ukraine did little to abate this distrust. While the international institutions continued to function, a closer look reveals that cooperation and coordination (the 'interlocking' concept) between them was mainly through staff-to-staff cooperation.³² It was ad-hoc and built on specific expertise, as these organisations more often than not operated in the same areas. Genuine institutionalisation was largely absent. EU-OSCE cooperation, for instance, though partly institutionalised, was mostly on a staff-to-staff ad-hoc basis as the EU preferred the UN for crisis management and strove to increase its own profile as a conflict prevention and stability actor. This did little to bridge the developing gap between Russia and the US.³³ In fact, the European security architecture itself increasingly became 'interblocking' through overlap in tasks and membership, and competition arose. Consensus on how tasks would be coordinated between the OSCE, the EU, the Council of Europe, the CSTO and NATO in areas such as crisis management, conflict prevention, counter-terrorism or non-proliferation was increasingly difficult to achieve.³⁴ For Russia, interest in a pan-European security architecture was mainly driven by positioning the OSCE as a counterbalance to NATO. In contrast, the West's interest in a security architecture, apart from democracy and human rights, lay in the stabilisation of the wider Europe and settlement of European ideas of democracy and multilateralism. As a result, the European security architecture descended into a web of formal but mostly informal cooperation schemes that gave free rein to rivalries between state and organisational actors and OSCE gradually lost its relevance.

³¹ Terrorist attacks from separatists and ethnic-based groups in Russia's North Caucasus and outside the North Caucasus increased between 2007-2010, exemplified by the bombing of the Moscow subway system in March 2010, resulting in over 40 deaths and many injuries.

³² Ojanen, "Analysing inter-organisational relations."

³³ Consultations between the OSCE Troika, including the OSCE Secretary General, and the EU at both the ministerial and ambassadorial/Political Security Committee levels. Contacts between the Secretary General and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and other high-level EU officials. Annual staff-level talks on topical issues that are on each organisation's agenda. See: OCSE, "The European Union."

³⁴ Duke, "The EU, NATO and the Lisbon Treaty: Still divided within a common city," 22.

5. Towards a revived comprehensive European security architecture

Two years into the war and the overall prospects for a pan-European security order appear bleak. Increasingly, policy makers and analysts argue that the geopolitical environment is moving away from the multilateral world that the EU foresaw in its strategy of 2003. Russia is no longer a member of the Council of Europe; most OSCE missions have closed, both EU and NATO are preparing their security and defence structures for deterrence combined with a revived partner and enlargement program. Communication and liaison between EU or NATO and Russia is frozen. New borders are drawn, and blocs are built across Europe.³⁵ If and when the fighting stops, there will therefore be no return to the liberal European security order as it was foreseen at the beginning of the nineties. At least not in the short run. As Karsten Jung argues, ‘given the apparent failure of prevailing liberal norms and institutions to prevent Russia’s war of aggression in Ukraine, such a reform of the European order will likely lead to a more pragmatic, realist approach to continental security.’³⁶

When so much is still in the balance, it is hard to conceive a post-war security architecture for Europe. At present NATO and the EU are firmly behind Ukraine, which in itself gives Putin an excellent opportunity to argue that Russia is really at war with the West. Such an argument strikes a chord with anti-Western states around the globe. Remarks by Western government and NATO officials to the effect that ‘Ukraine is fighting our war’ undermine the West’s narrative that it is not involved and instead strengthen Putin’s claim. Should the West fail in its efforts to sustain Ukraine, vastly more is likely to be lost than a number of provinces in Eastern and Southern Ukraine, however ghastly this prospect might already look to Kyiv. Should, on the other hand, Ukraine prevail, this could well have dire consequences for the Russian Federation, with political instability and regime change as possible first results. A third option, a stalemate resulting in yet another frozen conflict, will continue to drain resources. For various reasons, this scenario is perhaps even less attractive, but it might materialise when during a cold winter the as yet unbroken solidarity of the West with Ukraine will be severely tested. An argument can therefore be made that the war should be brought to an end before that date.

In 1814 the victors of the Sixth Coalition against Napoleon convened in Vienna to decide on the future of Europe, and by a touch of wisdom and political courage, decided to accept defeated, post-Napoleonic France into the ranks of participants. The arrangements laid down in the Vienna Final Act of 1815 created a system that lasted

³⁵ Biscop, “War for Ukraine and the rediscovery of geopolitics: Must the EU draw new battlelines or keep an open door?”; Kribbe, Lumet, and Middelaar, “Bringing the greater European family together: New perspectives on the European political community.”

³⁶ Jung, “A new concert for Europe: Security and order after the war,” 25.

about a century. Major warfare between Great Powers did not occur for about forty years, and the system was robust enough to weather the upheavals of 1848 and 1859–1861 and in fact lasted until 1914. Today, there is another organisation based at Vienna, that although it is hibernating now, could perform a similar function; the OSCE.

We hold that there are a number of reasons to reactivate that organisation. As during the Cold War, today most OSCE member states³⁷ belong to a security alliance; as during the Cold War, there is a divide between democratic governments on the one hand and authoritarian ones on the other. The guiding rules of the original CSCE however, stressed the sovereign equality of each participating state; it was not a conference between alliances or hegemonies and subject states, it was one between sovereign states. Furthermore, the OSCE is a regional organisation under Chapter VIII of the UN Charter, but never founded on a treaty which gives states more flexibility and freedom of movement. This also paved the way for the participation of a number of neutral and non-aligned states. The guidelines for good inter-state conduct it adopted in 1975 are still very much relevant today, in that they call for cooperative security and build upon the indivisibility of security, i.e., requiring states to adhere to human rights and fundamental freedoms. By defining human rights as ‘individual rights’ vis-à-vis the state, the concept contributed to international security in that it reaffirmed state sovereignty while at the same time limiting its powers.³⁸ They allow for territorial changes, on the condition that these are ‘mutually agreed upon.’

In addition, the OSCE is the only organisation apart from the UN in which Russia and the United States are member states; it also offers a level playing field between Russia and Ukraine, who each will participate as a sovereign state, and who cannot be expelled as the Council of Europe rules allow. In addition, each member state and not just the United Nations Security Council’s P5, has a veto.³⁹ The OSCE developed a system of confidence and security building measures and also offers a number of mechanisms and functionaries such as the High Commissioner on National Minorities that have proved their worth. Reviving OSCE does not need to conflict with NATO and EU enlargement. Ever since the end of the Cold War two collective defence organisations, NATO and CSTO, have existed under the OSCE umbrella.⁴⁰ While centred around states, it has accommodated petitions and heeded calls from various interest and minority groups and civil society and could do so again in, say, the Caucasus, Eastern Ukraine – or Northern Ireland for that matter.

³⁷ Formally the states are called participating states within the OSCE organisation instead of member states.

³⁸ See for instance Mazower, “The strange triumph of human rights, 1933–1950,” 379–98, 381.

³⁹ Though as a result of the growing number of participating states together with the conflicts in the OSCE area a consensus-minus-one rule was adopted at the beginning of the 1990s.

⁴⁰ Jung, “A new concert for Europe: Security and order after the war,” 25, 39.

We acknowledge that the OSCE's present condition is far from ideal as a starting point. But a case could be made that the benign neglect that befell the organisation after about 2000 contributed to where we are today. A revitalised OSCE may be a long way in coming, but we feel it should be attempted. After all, the alternatives of prolonged low-intensity conflict or nuclear escalation are hardly attractive.

Peace-making, to be sure, will require painful realisations and painful concessions; the winning side, should there be one, will have to be able to sell the result as a victory. The losing side will have to accept defeat. If and when an agreement is reached, it is obvious that upholding and sustaining it will not only require the continued commitment of Ukraine and Russia. It requires the umbrella of a multilateral coalition aiming for some kind of stability and peace arrangement under a newly created or already existing organisational framework. The OSCE obviously has much to its credit: after all, it managed to bridge the even wider gap between the victors and losers of World War Two, and overcome the divide between two mutually exclusive opposing political and ideological systems. The most important challenge for peace to return to the continent however begins after the ink of a ceasefire agreement has dried. To quote the preamble of the constitution of UNESCO: 'Since wars begin in the minds of men and women, it is in the minds of men and women that the defenses of peace will have to be constructed.' Inconceivable as it may seem today, multilateralism thus has an important role to play, especially in an age of Great Power Competition.

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