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FROM THE CSCE TO THE OSCE: is the World safer now?

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Europe and security in a fragmented world

Forty years have passed since the Helsinki Summit of the CSCE (Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe) took place in 1975, in a world that was notably different from today's in security terms. Is the world safer now than in 1975? Yes and no. It is more or less safe depending on how you look at it, but it is instructive to look back at 1975 *with today's eyes* to see what it was useful for and in what areas it failed to achieve its goals.

The summit took place with the bipolar system in full swing, strained intensely along the east-west axis and bisected by a north-south axis convulsed by wars of decolonisation and conflicts such as those in the Near East and Vietnam among others. From this perspective, the Helsinki Summit was, just by taking place

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But the Cold War keeps on resurfacing, not based on a globalised ideological antagonism, but obeying a much more ancient logic: competition for power and influence in their various forms.

The persistence of wars (or armed conflicts) and the difficulty of ending them will continue to be structural components of the global system.

The criticism of unipolarity, of the system based on an imperial centre of power, will require our intellectual energy for a long time if we genuinely want to advance our understanding of the 21st century world.

The state actor's centrality to the international system is not a thing of the past and its control over the international organisations is still decisive

As actors that are carriers of disorder, particular attention must be given to those hybrids called *de facto* states, which are relatively new in the international system and a recurring threat to global governance.

The underlying evidence is that European security – or if you prefer “pan-European” – is an essential condition of greater global security.

at all, a successful exercise in multilateral diplomacy promoted by the two super-powers at the time (without whom Helsinki could not have taken place). For the first time since 1946, the 35 countries from NATO (the US and its allies) and the Warsaw Pact (the USSR and its allies) came together with neutral countries (like Austria, Finland, Switzerland, Sweden and Yugoslavia) to establish more stable rules for relations between states. The scepticism of many experts seemed justified and the yield of three so-called “baskets” of agreements did not look, in the short term, particularly promising: a) agreements on security in Europe (under the heavy pressure of the terrifying nuclear arms race); b) cooperation agreements on economic and technological issues; and c) cooperation on human rights issues. It goes without saying that the USSR was greatly interested in the second basket and

hardly at all in the third, while the Western bloc claimed to be interested in the third and used the second as an incentive and means of punishment in the negotiations. Ultimately, because nobody could afford to ignore it, the first basket – security – is what objectively interested all parties. And it is here that, viewed from today, some results were produced, at least under the heading of preventive security.

Another aspect of the CSCE was innovative. Its beginnings were deliberately low profile (“conference” instead of “organisation”) and the idea was to agree on a *lasting method of operation without the formalisation of an international organisation* and to see if the so-called *programme of meetings* would produce results. And, though there were ups and downs, it was this way for almost the next fifteen years. Despite the so-called “Second Cold War” (1979-1990), the mere existence of the CSCE and its successive conferences, both plenary and sectoral (Madrid, Belgrade, Vienna), kept up a system of relations between the most important strategic blocs. And it is no accident that the CSCE ultimately became the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) in two phases: the Charter of Paris for a New Europe in 1990 (which maintained the name CSCE) and the formal foundation of the OSCE in Budapest in 1994 with permanent, formal institutions. This helps us to understand why, today, the OSCE, which now has 57 members, is an organisation whose importance cannot be ignored. Some argue that its performance is

The state is at the centre of all the ongoing debates, problems and solutions.

limited, for example in relation to the Russia-Ukraine crisis. But the UN has also been unable to do much. This failure is due both to the characteristics of these organisations and the public international law on conflicts. The OSCE has, though, played a key role in the post-Soviet space since 1994 through mediation, election observation, the promotion of democracy and other issues.

Let us put it in perspective. To do so, we will analyse today’s world in the light of the past, or, to be more precise, in the light of the legacy of the Second World War, which is a necessary condition for understanding the environment that produced the Helsinki Summit in 1975 and to make an evaluation of it.

The current international system of globalisation and particularly the development of a globalised economy began neither with the fall of the Berlin Wall nor on September 11th, 2001. It is a system whose foundations were negotiated and calculated during the second half of the Second World War by the soon-to-be victors. The Cold War was less a hiatus than a temporary straitjacketing (which ended up lasting four decades) of the globalised world, based on a balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union that ended in 1989. But the Cold War keeps on resurfacing, not based on a globalised ideological antagonism (capitalism vs. communism), but obeying a much more ancient logic: competition for power and influence in their various forms. And the global nature of this competi-

tion began back in 1941 when the United States and Russia entered the Second World War.

Today’s large global governance institutions were created in the last two years of the war. The International Monetary Fund, the World Bank (both Bretton Woods, 1944) and the United Nations (San Francisco, 1945) are, theoretically, instruments for dealing with the problems of the contemporary world, not museums in which to “visit the past”. But to better understand today’s world, it is essential to understand the world of those times and the circumstances in which these decisions were made. The founders had no crystal ball for seeing the future. Their eyes were fixed on two reference points: the Second World War and its costs and consequences for the world; and the certainty that the post-war world would be nothing like the one before. The hierarchy of power between states, the economic power of one or the other, the end of the cycle of phenomena like decolonisation, all this and much more sketched out a landscape in which *the victors of the Second World War* wanted to safeguard their respective interests. The Cold War took two years to begin but all its contradictions were already in place. Even today, the United Nations is paradigmatic of all this. Its founders had one eye on all the issues mentioned above and another on not repeating the errors of the immediate past. Specifically, they were determined not to copy the disastrous League of Nations, which in its twenty years of life between the two World Wars could neither avoid nor

resolve the conflicts that led to the Second World War. Crucially, the United States’ Senate refused to ratify the League’s charter and the

lesson was learned that the United States would always be reluctant to take on permanent international obligations without firewalls to protect its “national interest” (in President Truman’s words). Among the victors, this stance was immediately accepted by the rest of the members, who were to enjoy the so-called “right of veto” and the status of permanent member of the Security Council.

From this point of view, perhaps the Helsinki Summit of 1975 and the setting up of the CSCE could be considered a kind of “reset” in relations between the United States and USSR after nearly thirty years of bipolar tension, concentrated above all (although not exclusively) in Europe. It meant rewriting the rules of the Cold War in terms of “streamlined competition”, of controlled risks. It is no coincidence that the 70s also saw the two first significant agreements on nuclear weapons, SALT I and SALT II, and the term “confidence and security measures” was coined to apply to military alternatives, both conventional and nuclear. All this did not end the conflicts around the world, but it *encapsulated* some of the most sensitive issues in the field.

Armed conflicts: continuity or change?

Approaching the issue of armed conflicts during the Cold War and today it is useful to bear one fact in mind: the persistence of wars (or armed conflicts at one level or another) and the difficulty of ending them have been and will contin-

ue to be structural components of the global system. During the Cold War there were 135 armed conflicts in 43 years and since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 the number of wars worldwide has oscillated between 52 and 34 a year. Why? The various explanatory theses are too long for the dimensions of this article but we can at least explore the changes to the art of war.

One striking novelty in the last quarter of a century is the return of war to Europe, a scenario that the Cold War's "bipolar system" had certainly sent into hibernation (the CSCE aided in that), replacing it with fierce competition between the United States and the Soviet Union in the rest of the planet. Now we need only mention the armed conflicts in the former Yugoslavia or various locations in the "post-Soviet space" since 1992 and the current, dramatic case of the Russian intervention in eastern Ukraine.

Another debate revolves around the international community and the pressure to respond with legal (according to the UN) force through military interventions that are unavoidable but not always guaranteed to be constructive. And there is the issue of allowing the control of the political management of the post-military phase, which is to say, the post-war reconstruction of the countries that end up destroyed in all conflicts.

Can we perchance claim that some interventions by, or authorised by, the United Nations and the deployment of OSCE missions in the Balkans and Caucasus have served no purpose? Or that the situation in those places would be better if neither organisation existed? The thesis is hardly convincing. To a degree there is a cause and effect relationship between the military interventions in the former Yugoslavia and the subsequent appearance of democratising processes in Croatia and Serbia. Likewise, the final outcome in the case of Kosovo cannot be analysed or understood without the context of what happened from 1987 to 2008 between Belgrade and Kosovo, with the added pressure of the UN, NATO, the EU and the OSCE. All of this was unthinkable in the 70s and 80s, meaning the evaluation of the CSCE's utility or performance must be framed by another kind of perspective, within the parameters of the bipolar world and its posterior mutation.

At the same time, the overburdening of the United Nations and the surfeit of requests made of it and other organisations like the OSCE by the so-called international community has grown over recent years and may now have peaked. It may be, then, that we are witnessing an ebb in the tide of universalist, interventionist enthusiasm that has affected international public opinion in the past quarter of a century. One of the reasons for this is the difficulty of applying an essential requirement that, when employed, the use of force should be towards improving global order: force, based on the law, should be founded on the principle of equality (before the law) and generality in its application (sanctions and force). But it does not work like that and the level of comparative injustice is statistically overwhelming.

Unipolar world or fragmented world? The OSCE as heir to the CSCE

With the Cold War long since over, the debate on the purportedly unipolar world can also be ended. We do not live in a unipolar world, but in one with various centres of power that differ in functional nature (military, economic, ideological) and subject to neither determined dynamics nor formal rules. This places organisations like the OSCE within a different structural dynamic to that of the CSCE in its day. The post-bipolar international system does not appear to be restructuring itself in a vertical hierarchical sense, rather, at the moment, it finds itself in a dynamic that is pre-emptive and based on high or low-level confrontations resulting (we presume) from a kind of rational risk/benefit calculation. Equally, we live in a time when the various actors in the system are trying to mark territory (to use the terminology of the animal kingdom and the struggle to control territory, hunting, water and resources).

So, for example, relations between Russia and the United States, between China and those two and Europe's hesitancy about them all are signs and symptoms, but little more. The criticism of unipolarity, of the system based on an imperial centre of power, will require our intellectual energy for a long time if we genuinely want to advance our understanding of the 21st century world. Why? Because out of intellectual convenience or inertia we tend to accept every semblance of an

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act of power made by the US as proof of two false conclusions. The first is that of the unipolar world. In a unipolar world, those wielding the power would be able to do whatever they wanted at all times and in all fields, from politics to the economy. But does anyone, for example, control the notorious global financial volatility (the principal source of economic insecurity in the contemporary world)? The second false conclusion is that the state as an actor may be side-stepped. On the contrary, the state remains irreplaceable in the international system because (among other reasons) from a normative point of view its control of the international organisations remains decisive. Every agreement signed and every pattern in the order of the international system relies and will continue to rely on agreement between states, and the concept of the "interdependence" of state actors must be faced no matter how powerful or otherwise an actor appears to be. In the OSCE space this is as evident as it is necessary.

Two apparently contradictory trends can be deduced from what has been set out here. On the one hand, the state actor will no longer have the importance it had in other times, as it competes with other actors, coexists more or less happily with international organisations and contemplates the erosion of the (theoretically) untouchable principle of sovereignty. But on the other, despite all of this, the state is at the centre of all the ongoing debates, problems and solutions. It is the essential actor in the international organisations: in the UN, in the OSCE and in NATO it is the promoter or brake on the

development of international law (if states agree, it receives a significant boost, when they do not, it is greatly weakened); it is the central player in all fruitful negotiation, whether this occurs in a bilateral or multilateral setting, in interstate diplomacy or via international organisations. In other words, the state is still the inevitable and irreplaceable main player in the international system that is meant, ultimately, to bring about a degree of *global public order*.

As actors that are *carriers of disorder*, particular attention must be given to those hybrids called *de facto states*, which are relatively new in the international system (compared with the days of the Cold War), a recurring threat to global governance and a challenge for the United Nations and the OSCE, in particular. Furthermore, in some sense they *usurp* the concept of the state, questioning its most exclusive attributes. Almost all examples of *de facto states* have arisen (with the odd exception in Somalia) in the so-called *post-Soviet space*: in Moldova, in Georgia, in Azerbaijan, etc.

Faced with this, the underlying question remains unanswered: how can the international community – taking the term in its most conventional sense, to mean the United Nations and other regional intergovernmental organisations, such as the European Union and the OSCE – take action? The CSCE certainly never had these problems.

There are normally at least two prior conditions in the proc-

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esses of *de facto states* emerging: first is a pre-existing state form, formally recognised by international law with all the formal attributes inherent in it – said state entity has, of course, fallen into crisis for internal or external reasons or both; the second condition is a heterogeneous population with explicit divisions (ethnic, religious, linguistic and so on) between the different population groups and where, often, the trauma of the post-state conflict correlates with the mixing or overlapping of said groups on the land.

To succeed, *de facto states* must have *lasting duration*, which depends on two possibilities. The first is that an external actor that is stable, nearby and strong (that is to say with deterrent capabilities) adopts the *de facto state* as a matter of self-interest. An irrefutable example of this is post-Soviet Russia in the cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, to a lesser degree Adjara in Georgia, and, most obvious of all, Transnistria in Moldova. The first such case occurred, fittingly enough, in the USSR in the heat of what was called *perestroika* in 1988 with Nagorno-Karabakh, an enclave between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Here, the link with Armenia came prior to the country achieving sovereignty (the crisis and armed conflict began in 1988/1989 when Armenia and Azerbaijan were still federated republics of the USSR). The second possibility for a *de facto state* depends on an important international organisation (the UN, NATO, the OSCE or others such as the Office of the High Representative (OHR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina

after the Dayton Accords in November 1995) taking charge of the case, in principle temporarily, until an outcome to the problem is reached through one of various alternatives. One of the most interesting case studies is, and will continue to be, Kosovo. If all the above is true, the OSCE has a very busy schedule ahead. And if a solution is found, the OSCE will be part of it, not part of the problem.

Some conclusions

We have seen how, with the 1975 Helsinki Summit, the CSCE initiates a new phase in which the concept of European security has a central place on the international agenda. In terms of foresight, was it possible to guess how Europe would evolve and how the current world would be? Some made attempts that, surprisingly, contained bright glimpses of anticipation. It is common to cite André Fontaine, former editor of the prestigious newspaper *Le Monde*, who, in an interesting essay published in 1975, tried to anticipate how the *last quarter of the 20th century* would be. Setting aside the error of considering the Soviet bloc virtually immutable and unreformable (an error shared by everyone at that time), he was already using the expression “Balkans everywhere!” to head a chapter devoted to the growing instability in many places around the world. True, his predictions on Europe have not followed a mechanical path but he was also already using the expression “tired Europe” to outline some of its current contradictions (Fontaine, 1975).

Still less noticed was a short but brilliant essay on “The Westernisation of the World” by Serge Latouche published in January 1989 (months before the fall of the Berlin Wall), in which the author put forward the theory of the dynamic of *standardisation* at global level – before the word *globalisation* was in use – as well as the limits and obstacles of this dominant dynamic. What did it consist of? Curiously, it might appear that bin Laden had read this book, as its first chapter was called: “The Crusader’s Revenge”. And in truth, this is an expression that nobody used in 1989, whereas nowadays al-Qaeda has built much of its recruitment capacity on precisely the revenge against that revenge, specifically urging the fight against “the new crusades”. The author referred merely to the evidence of a series of signs that since the historical times of colonisation and even more since the two World Wars took the ill-defined *Western model* as its only reference point. This essay came out a few months before Fukuyama’s on the “end of history” and was built on a much more solid foundation. In contrast to Fukuyama, Latouche dedicates a good part of his reflection just to advancing what, in the medium term, would, without doubt, be the reasons such an optimistic hypothesis would fail. Under the heading “The Limits of World-wide Westernisation”, he includes a harsh prediction of the failure of development, or perhaps, *developmentalism* as an ideology founded on a mechanical hypothesis of progress that is unstoppable and well distributed. He adds another lucid vision of *the crisis of the Western concept of international order* and concludes with a properly visionary paragraph, read in 2015:

“We are in times when men form a single people...But the city (in the sense of *polis*) they have built is deformed; within it injustice, violence and hatred reign. It destroys itself. And technology, which was meant to create abundance and settle disputes, in fact gives multiplying capacity to violence, injustice and hate. The risk of total destruction, pure and simple, is greater than ever” (Latouche, 1989).

We can make a leap in time and give two more examples: *Le Monde-Dossier* on March 23rd and 24th 2003 was titled “the new global fracture” and included four substantial reflections. The first concerns the debate on the future of the UN, which celebrated its sixtieth anniversary in 2005 and which continues to be trapped in questions of balances of power at the heart of the Security Council. The second is an (other) attempt to evaluate whether American power (meaning the United States) can be defined in terms of a *single superpower*, an expression of the *unipolar world*, or an *empire in decline*. The third has a premonition of a Europe in crisis. While the fourth postulates and analyses three scenarios in the Middle East and the world in general, beginning with the war in Iraq. Bearing in mind publication coincided precisely with the start of that war the result could not be prejudged. But the third scenario, which the authors called “La catástrofe”, was the one that turned out to be true and the authors’ most pessimistic predictions ended up falling short of the reality.

The second example is in number 757 of the prestigious publication *Le Courrier International* in May 2005 in which a forecasting exercise was published of prospective conflicts in the scenarios of a imagined *fourth world war*. Why the fourth? The third could have been the Cold War, but it was also said that September 11th 2001 marked the beginning of the start of the *third world war*, or the fourth if the Cold War is counted. It doesn’t matter, the two World Wars should not be trivialised by any war whatsoever being called “world”, as dramatic as they may be. In fact, the conflict situations that could result in a dangerous escalation, according to this publication, would be the following: a) the day on which Beijing attacks Taiwan; b) the Gulf flares up again (a scenario in which the United States launches a military attack on Iran); c) conflict between the two Koreas or an attack on North Korea; d) spread of the conflict in Africa’s Great Lakes region; and e) war in Colombia around 2019. As can be seen, the weak point of this kind of exercise is that it invariably tends to think of global instability and disorder in terms of traditional war in geographically delimited areas that are resolved militarily. This kind of thinking is greatly in crisis.

A final conclusion: although initially the CSCE was exclusively concerned in 1975 with the concept of “European security”, both then (during the Cold War) and from 1992 onwards, and despite its transformations, the underlying evidence is that European security – or if you prefer “pan-European” – is an essential condition of greater global security. Do not forget that the OSCE is a peculiar forum, the only on security matters on which both the United States and Russia sit, where they can debate and negotiate in a more flexible manner than the straitjacketed UN Security Council. In its way, and under different global parameters, the Helsinki Summit in 1975 still makes sense.

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