Analysis

"The real risk to NATO is CSCE"[1]

The role of NATO at the end of the Cold War

Laurien Crump

Seventy years after the birth of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), it is hard to imagine a world without the Western alliance. The American stake in European security seems self-evident, despite the unpredictable behavior of the current president of the United States. Since NATO was, however, founded as a Western bulwark to "Keep the Soviet Union out, the Germans down, and the Americans in", as Lord Ismay, NATO's first Secretary General, famously put it, it is far from inevitable that NATO is still with us today.[2] One might wonder why NATO not only survived, but also expanded after the end of the Cold War, when there were other international organizations, such as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), that might have seemed a more logical alternative at the time.

This article therefore focuses primarily on the role of NATO at the end of the Cold War in relation to the CSCE. The central question will be why a Cold War relic such as NATO emerged as the main security structure also *after* the Cold War, whereas the CSCE, which was designed to transcend the Cold War divide, did not prevail as the central security organization. The answer to this question also has ramifications for European security today, since the prevailing security architecture is one that excludes Russia. In order to answer this question, the article starts with a short overview of NATO's role within the CSCE process, before concentrating on the end of the Cold War.

NATO and the CSCE

The Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe was initially a Warsaw Pact initiative, in which all European countries, except Albania, participated, including the Soviet Union, as well as the United States and Canada. When the first conference began on the outskirts of Helsinki in November 1972, the Americans showed little interest. Since hard-core security was treated within the framework of the simultaneous negotiations on Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions and the Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty, it seemed somewhat beyond NATO's remit, anyhow. Moreover, the American president Richard Nixon and his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, were more interested in superpower détente with the Soviet Secretary General Leonid Brezhnev, than in the kind of multilateral, Pan-European détente that seemed to be fostered by the CSCE.

At the same time, the CSCE gave an enormous impetus to the European Community (EC), and became the platform on which the EC began to shape its foreign policy through European Political Cooperation, together with the new members, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark. While European Political Cooperation bloomed within the CSCE-context, the NATO-countries were in the first half of the 1970s at loggerheads over other issues, such as the Oil Crisis. Culminating in the renowned Helsinki Final Act in 1975, which both declared the intra-German borders inviolable (but not unchangeable) and

unprecedentedly included human rights as integral to European Security, the CSCE is retrospectively seen as a Cold War watershed in broadening security from a concept between states to one that also pertained to individuals — with huge ramifications for the legitimacy of the Eastern European regimes.

To the Americans at the time the Helsinki Final Act nevertheless seemed no more than a side-show. Kissinger famously quipped that "they could write it in Swahili, for all I care", and, as such, it was mainly a European affair.[3] That changed with the follow-up conference in Belgrade in 1977-78, when the newly elected American president Jimmy Carter became much more interested in the CSCE-process due to its emphasis on human rights. The ensuing confrontational attitude by the American delegation was, however, resented by most Western-European delegations, who also perceived the CSCE as a means to bridge the Cold War divide. The EC-caucus even refused official cooperation with the NATO-caucus, under the pretext that it would estrange the neutral and non-aligned countries. Tensions between both caucuses remained throughout the existence of the CSCE, and the Americans often felt excluded by the EC-caucus. In the next follow-up conference in Madrid (1980-83), this led to an open rift between NATO and the EC, with the Americans pleading for sanctions against the Soviet Union in the wake of martial law in Poland in December 1981 and the EC-caucus preaching moderation. "The necessity to maintain Western unity" became as much a priority as the original intention to transcend the Iron Curtain or liberalize Eastern Europe.[4] In the last follow-up conference, in Vienna (1986-89), the EC-countries definitively seized the initiative. Sensing that a new wind blew in the Soviet bloc after Mikhail Gorbachev entered office as Secretary General in 1985, the EC-countries used the CSCE-platform to profile the community as "a common destiny" and already invited Eastern European countries to look in the EC's direction long before the fall of the Berlin Wall.[5]

Window of opportunity

The fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 initially seemed to open another window of opportunity. Gorbachev saw the CSCE as an instrument to materialize his vision of a "Common European Home", in which both Cold War alliances would be dissolved, Russia would "return to Europe", and the CSCE would become the focal point for European cooperation.[6] This vision, however vague, resonated with some important Western European players, such as the West German foreign minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who perceived the CSCE as a way to transcend the Cold War divide, and the French president, Francois Mitterrand, who relished the opportunity to get the Americans out of Europe. The German question was, however, not yet resolved and soon took priority over the reunification of Europe. It was in the eleven months between the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification on 3 October 1990 that Gorbachev was promised that NATO would "not spread an inch Eastward" by Jim Baker, the American Secretary of State — a "myth" according to NATO's website, but an established fact according to the latest archival research.[7] None of this was, however, agreed on paper; such a formal agreement could not even have been reached, since the Warsaw Pact still existed.

Meanwhile, Gorbachev still pinned his hopes on the CSCE as the focal point in the prospective European security architecture after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The CSCE also seemed 'the natural framework in the continued search for a peaceful order in Europe' to political scientists at the time.[8] It was considered unwise to exclude the Soviet Union from a

united Europe, since '[i]n the long run, nothing would be more destabilizing than an excluded and frustrated Soviet Union, which marginalization under humiliating circumstances could drive to revenge.'[9] The fact that Gorbachev was promised a CSCE summit in Paris in November 1990 fueled his hopes that a new Europe, including Russia, could be built. In the rapid pace of events in 1990 the CSCE nevertheless lost its momentum. Gorbachev was preoccupied by internal turmoil, and the Gulf War distracted the superpowers' attention in the summer of 1990.

The negotiations leading up to the Paris summit took place in Vienna. NATO began to play a far more substantial role in these: it was decided in the spring of 1990 to also place the negotiations on Conventional Forces in Europe under the umbrella of the CSCE, even though those negotiations only took place between NATO and Warsaw Pact countries, excluding the neutral and non-aligned ones. The Eastern European countries which had recently freed themselves from the communist yoke already flocked to collaborate with the NATO countries, as the former head of the Dutch delegation, Lambert Veenendaal, remembers, with the Soviet Union simply acquiescing in this new state of affairs.[10] With the incipient collapse of the Soviet Bloc, NATO and the EC increasingly closed ranks. There remained little room for Gorbachev's ideals of a Common European home, with the Soviet Union in paralysis and most other WP countries already gravitating towards NATO. Meanwhile, the Western alliance seized the initiative by agreeing in a summit in July 1990 in London what was to be addressed at the CSCE summit in Paris four months later.

NATO First

The post-Cold War order seemed to veer in the direction of the "prefab solution", in which the already existing Western institutions would also define the post-Cold War architecture.[11] This was adumbrated by the proceedings after the reunification of Germany on 3 October 1990: the new German delegation in Paris consisted only of diplomats from former Western Germany, with the East German diplomats disappearing from the scene altogether. Some delegates in Paris perceived the CSCE summit primarily as a reward for Gorbachev's acquiescence in the reunification of Germany, rather than an attempt to rebuild the European security architecture in such a way that it would include Russia. The ensuing "Charter of Paris for a new Europe", focuses both on the summit as an end and as a new beginning.[12] Whereas the Soviets coveted a new beginning, in which Russia would finally "return to Europe", the Western participants were mainly intent on ending the Cold War. At the same time, Baker clearly voiced the American concern by stating that "the real risk to NATO is CSCE".[13]

In this constellation little thought was given to the future of the Soviet Union, which collapsed a year later shortly after the Warsaw Pact. The newly emerging Russia was banned from returning to Europe in the triumphalist mood that predominated at the end of the Cold War. Bush's credo "We prevailed, they didn't. We can't let the Soviets clutch victory from the jaws of defeat", says it all.[14] Moreover, the transformation from the EC into the European Union at the February 1992 Maastricht summit also paved the way for an altogether new Europe: one which was united through the institutes of the EU, eventually *with* the accession of Central and Eastern European countries, but emphatically *without* Russia. Throughout the 1990s the Russians nevertheless tried to place the CSCE, and its successor, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, more firmly at the heart

of the European security structure so as to prevent Russian isolation.[15] Some Western countries also felt the OSCE had the potential to unify a Europe *with* Russia rather than pushing it to its periphery through NATO. In 1994 the German and Dutch foreign ministers, Klaus Kinkel and Pieter Kooijmans, even developed the "OSCE First" initiative in order to prioritize the OSCE in decision-making on European Security. The Americans so strongly objected to this initiative that it did not even reach formal negotiations. The official American "NATO first" doctrine accordingly prevailed, pushing Russia to the margins of Europe.

In this light, the continuous Russian discontent with NATO expansion from 1996 onwards is understandable, too. After Russia had failed to return to Europe, its former allies were welcomed with open arms into the embrace of its former antagonist, something that is historically almost without precedent. For this reason, the architect of containment, George Kennan, warned the American president, Bill Clinton, in the strongest possible terms against NATO expansion, arguing that it would become a self-fulfilling prophecy with the "American founding-fathers turning over in their graves".[16] Meanwhile, Gorbachev himself also wondered why this was necessary, since, "[s]ecurity, […] is needed only if there is a threat, so who was threatening whom?"[17] According to some analysts, the fact that there was "no place for Russia" in the European security structure contributes to explaining the current crisis in European security with Russia asserting itself in Ukraine.[18]

Conclusion

Seventy years after the birth of NATO and thirty years after the fall of the Berlin wall, it is time to take stock. In the wake of the crisis in Ukraine there have been several calls to place "the OSCE again at the heart of multilateral diplomacy in Europe", most notably from the troika that led it in 2016.[19] With the EU in turmoil over Brexit and many NATO-countries skeptical of the policies of its alliance leader, Donald Trump, this call seems timely. Unlike NATO, the OSCE represents *all* countries in Europe as well as Russia, Canada and the United States, whereas it was intended to transcend the Cold War. A place needs to be found for Russia to prevent it from asserting itself in still more aggressive ways. There is no new Cold War, but so long as there is "no place for Russia" in Europe, the post-Cold War settlement simply remains "unfinished", as a recent OSCE report argues. According to the same report "mutual historical empathy" is needed to resolve the current crisis in European security.[20] This is an issue that needs to be addressed by NATO so that the alliance can withstand the test of another seventy years. Simply "keeping the Russians out" is no longer an option in the current geopolitical constellation.

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[1] Baker quoted in Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, 'Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion', in: *International Security* 40: 4 (2016), 31.
[2] https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/declassified_137930.htm, accessed on 17 April 2019.

[3] Kissinger cited in Jussi Hanhimäki, 'Henry Kissinger: Vision or Status Quo', in Frederic Bozo, Piers Ludlow et al. (eds.), *Visions of the End of the Cold War in Europe, 1945-1990*, New York, 2012, p. 202.
[4] Archive Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *file* 4129, Minute, The Hague, 2.5.1983.
[5] Ibid., dossier CPE 1504, cpe mad 30, 13.1.89.
[6] Marie-Pierre Rey, '"Europe is our Common Home": A study of Gorbachev's diplomatic concept', *Cold War History* 4:2 (2004).
[7] Mary Elise Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe*, Princeton, 2009, 2014, pp. 107-115.
[8] Karl Birnbaum and Ingo Peters, 'The CSCE: A Reassessment of Its Role in the 1980s', *Review of International Studies*, 16, 1990, no. 4, p. 319.
[9] Francois Heisbourg, 'From a Common European Home to a European Security System', in Gregory Treverton (ed.), *The Shape of the New Europe*, Council on Foreign Relations, 1992, p. 48.
[10] Interview with Lambert Veenendaal, The Hague, 15 April 2019.
[11] Sarotte, *1989*, 119.
[12] 'Charter of Paris For a New Europe', 1990, https://www.oscepa.org/documents/all-documents/documents1/historical-documents-1/673-1990-charter-of-paris-for-a-new-europe/file, accessed on 18 April 2019.
[13] Baker quoted in Shifrinson, 'Deal or No Deal?', 31.
[14] George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, New York, 1998, 253.
[15] See e.g. Ambassador Vladimir Shustov, Head of the Russian Delegation to the OSCE, 'Perspectives for the OSCE in Tomorrow's Europe', Berne, 1995, Dutch National Archives, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Archive no.: Z238; Inv. no: 9. 41-46.
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[17] Mikhail Gorbachev, *The New Russia*, Cambridge, 2016, 307.
[18] William Hill, *No place for Russia: European Security Institutions Since 1989*, Columbia, 2018.
[19] 'Eine starke OSZE für ein sicheres Europa', Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Sebastian Kurz and Paolo Gentiloni, 7 December 2016, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,* http://plus.faz.net/evr-editions/2016-12-07/pjlfVTXSNNgvVyUcHiR5J2b0?GEPC=s5, accessed on 22 April 2019.
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