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Session I - Shaping a Security Community: thematic and geographic
issues within a comprehensive security agenda

Non-Military Security Issues and Community Building in Europe

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The OSCE's '*Strategy to Address Threats to Security and Stability in the Twenty-First Century*', adopted in 2003, was one of the first documents to lay out the new broader definition of security emerging since the end of the Cold War. It dwelled not only on conflict risks and transnational threats like terrorism, but also on common hazards affecting the OSCE area in the dimensions of migration, environment, economy, and crime.

Developments since 2003 have further highlighted this last set of what we may call 'softer', or non-military and non-violent, security issues, for Europe as for the world in general. The global crash of 2008 reminded us how deeply we depend on economic and financial security, while several pandemic alerts have tested our health security systems, and a single event – a rather modest volcanic eruption – in my own country of Iceland managed to paralyse a whole region's air traffic.

Challenges of this kind famously ignore national and national borders, making no distinction between political friends and foes. Of all parts of the wider security spectrum, these issues at least should remind us of our common human vulnerability; of the transnational infrastructures and communications we increasingly rely on; of our economic interdependence; and other aspects of modern coexistence that should both drive and help us to build a cooperative security community.

But while these issues have never left the OSCE agenda and have generally been handled constructively, it seems they have not been powerful enough to overcome the other differences of interest, priority, and perception in defence and security that still overshadow this organization's agenda - and may be casting its very future into doubt. Have we perhaps missed something; failed to get the full value that we could have done from the multi-functional security approach to community building? Or is there something about the issues themselves that limits the role they can play in security building from the Atlantic to the Urals, and in the institutional context of OSCE as such? I think the problem is indeed mainly the latter, and I will offer three sets of reasons: the way the challenges themselves are felt in our area, the institutional aspect, and Europe's own limitations as an actor.

To start with, even if non-military risks spread widely across borders, their impact and the local experience and perceptions of them can be quite different. The natural disasters people fear in Central Asia or the Mediterranean are not the same as in the Nordic region or the Urals. Fighting a pandemic in a city of ten million is not the same as in a remote rural area. Emergencies caused by terrorist or criminal action, and civil disorder, are near the top of the list for some nations but hardly relevant to others. The degree and nature of worries about energy, food and water supplies and other infrastructure risks are shaped not just by the level and pattern of society's development, but also on what types of energy and distribution system are being used. Specific economic and social weaknesses vary just as much, and even concern about the now fashionable topic of cyber-attack depends on how far your society and official systems have been 'wired up' in the first place.

As with any other kind of security, people's feelings about how such problems should be tackled can also be a complication. Some societies welcome the military's help in everyday problems, others do not. And even if they trust their own police and military, they might not be happy to see foreign police and military coming in to help under an emergency cooperation arrangement. The European Union since end-2010 has had a powerful 'solidarity' clause on paper – in Article 222 of the Lisbon Treaty – that obliges Member States to help each other in non-military contingencies with literally 'all the means at their disposal'. But scholars who have studied how it might work are inclined to question how keen countries in different parts of Europe will be to spend money and effort on each others' disasters, especially if they find reason to suspect that the locals were somehow to blame. Further, EU countries have varying legal frameworks for their emergency services and do not necessarily have the legal base to accept foreign personnel in such executive roles, or to send their own people abroad. If we face such problems in the world's most tightly integrated community, they must surely multiply among more diverse nations who perhaps still have primary, 'hard' security concerns about each other.

The OSCE, it must be said, is not the institution to solve this as it has no power to make binding laws and regulations. Nor can it handle large funds and resource pools to help equalize standards in civil protection. Its expertise on 'soft' threats and risks is small and its crisis mechanisms are geared to a quite different set of contingencies.

The key point, however, is probably that any purely European or Eurasian institutions can only play a subsidiary role in tackling what are often truly global phenomena; or at least, that rarely strike in a way just matching the OSCE area. When their footprint is smaller, sub-regional organizations are often the best way of preparing and reacting. When the impact is larger, the UN - and such agencies as WHO for pandemics and the IMO for maritime issues - are the obvious framework both for regulation and response.

So is there no role here for OSCE? My frank conclusion is that such issues cannot indeed be expected to 'save' OSCE: but OSCE can make a real contribution on the issues, by exchanging information and experience, identifying common goals and standards that do exist among all its members on more specific aspects of civil security, and maybe acting as a clearing house for assistance in particular cases. As with its joint positions against proliferation and terrorism, what it produces can be a valid and valued input to the challenge of handling these common human risks at global level. Whatever our continuing limitations as a security community, our highly institutionalized region is surely better placed - and should set its standards higher - than many other parts of the world, where war-torn or starving societies would be only too grateful to have the kind of security agenda that OSCE faces today.