

OSCE Security Days

Session II - Shaping a Security Community: addressing emerging global challenges. Developing a new approach to conventional arms control?

Contribution by Ambassador Steven Pifer

Director, Brookings Arms Control Initiative and Senior Adviser, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

Vienna, June 25, 2012

When thinking about the role that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) can play in conventional arms control—both conventional force limits and confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs)—it may make sense to start with some basic questions. Here are seven questions that OSCE might consider.

Question #1: What security concerns and needs does OSCE seek to address via conventional arms control and/or new CSBMs?

Currently, the Vienna Document on CSBMs and the Open Skies Treaty function fairly well, albeit with some implementation concerns. As for the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, it is functioning at 29, but Russia, which has the largest military in the OSCE area and which suspended its observation of the treaty in 2008, is a big missing piece. While efforts have been made over the past several years to bring Russia back into full participation in the treaty, it is difficult to see restoring CFE at its full 30 participants or moving to an adapted CFE Treaty with 36 participants.

The question then arises: Does this matter? If so, how much? After all, the headline goals of the CFE Treaty have been largely achieved. Some 70,000 pieces of treaty-limited equipment (e.g., tanks, artillery) have been eliminated over the past 20 years, and the capabilities for large-scale offensive military operations have been greatly reduced, if not eliminated. Those capabilities are unlikely to be restored in the near term, as militaries throughout Europe continue to downsize.

NATO forces already are well below the CFE Treaty limits and are below most, if not all, Adapted CFE Treaty limits. Defense budget cuts in almost all NATO countries will mean even further force reductions. In these circumstances, does Moscow have serious grounds to worry about a conventional attack? For that matter, does Moscow have serious motives to seek new conventional arms limits?

As for NATO, many—but not all—NATO members no longer fear Russian conventional military action. Russian conventional forces have deteriorated significantly over the past two decades. While the Russian government has announced an ambitious modernization plan, there are serious doubts, given resource limits, whether it will be fully implemented. The Russian military,

moreover, faces other problems, such as declining demographics: the number of Russian males who turn draft age in 2017 will be one-half the number in 2006. So does NATO have reasons to worry much about Russian conventional forces?

It would seem that the current security “problems” in Europe are different from those during the Cold War, when large NATO and Warsaw Pact military formations faced off against one another across the inner German border. Today’s problems are lack of political confidence regarding neighbors’ intentions coupled with specific concerns that stem from subregions of insecurity or of fragile security plus the fear of localized military tensions or localized offensive operations.

Question #2: If we agree that these are the kinds of security problems that OSCE faces today, what subregions do we have in mind?

There appear to be two groups. The first group comprises those subregions where states feel a measure of insecurity or uncertainty about their security position. One example would be a subregion encompassing Poland, the Baltic states and the Kaliningrad and Pskov regions of Russia. The second group includes subregions of protracted conflict. An example would be the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Question #3: Should OSCE focus limits and CSBMs on subregions of insecurity or make the measures apply OSCE-wide with the intent of capturing all the subregions?

A focus on the subregions would allow OSCE to tailor measures to meet the particular security needs of those areas. There might be merit in a general set of measures and rules that would apply to all subregions as opposed to negotiating a specific set of measures and rules for each particular subregion. Alternatively, OSCE might negotiate measures that would apply to all OSCE states, but the Dutch hardly need greater transparency CSBMs regarding Belgian military activities—and vice-versa—in the way that such measures might be of benefit for the situation between the Baltic states and Russia.

Question #4: Should OSCE focus on limits on conventional military forces or on achieving greater transparency and new CSBMs regarding force structures and military activities?

A practical consideration is which is more achievable in the near term? It would probably be easier to negotiate additional transparency measures and CSBMs, so OSCE might begin with these. If progress is made in this area, that could generate momentum for a discussion on conventional limits, if such limits were deemed important. New transparency measures and other CSBMs could also be a near-term way to alleviate tensions and concerns in the subregions of insecurity.

This does not mean that OSCE should ignore limits on conventional forces. It only means to suggest that the more productive course might be to focus first on CSBMs, where progress appears more likely.

Question #5: If/when OSCE considers limits on conventional forces, what should it seek to limit?

It may be that the limits that the CFE Treaty applies—to tanks, armored combat vehicles, artillery, attack helicopters and aircraft—no longer make as much sense as they did during the Cold War. For, example, tanks were the primary focus of concern during the CFE negotiations, yet today most militaries are shedding tanks. The Russian army is dramatically reducing its tank holdings; the Dutch military will abandon its armored branch; and the U.S. military—which is allowed 4,000 tanks in Europe under the CFE Treaty—now deploys fewer than 100 in Europe, and that number is headed to zero.

Concerns today focus on other weapons categories, such as unmanned aerial vehicles and surface-to-surface missiles. So while we may not want to give up the old CFE categories, it may make sense to consider limiting new categories if OSCE pursues CFE-like limits.

An alternative approach would seek to limit those qualitative capabilities that enable offensive operations, capabilities such as mobility, deployability, sustainability and command and control. This is a very interesting concept, but it would prove extraordinarily difficult to translate this approach into specific treaty limits.

Question #6: How should OSCE deal with conventional arms control and CSBMs regarding forces deployed on the territory of OSCE members without their consent?

Several subregions in the OSCE area have status issues, such as South Ossetia and Abkhazia. OSCE will not and should not try to resolve these status questions through an arms control approach; they will have to be resolved in another way. At the same time, OSCE cannot leave these areas as “holes” outside the coverage of conventional limits or CSBMs; that would undermine the relevancy of any regime that OSCE designs.

Question #7: Are senior political leaders in OSCE member states prepared to engage on questions of conventional arms limits and CSBMs?

This goes back to the first question. Russia and NATO do not appear to care all that much about the current conventional forces situation and the fact that the CFE Treaty has broken down. There is little evidence that senior leaders—chancellors, prime ministers and presidents—worry about these issues or have engaged to find solutions. It will be difficult for OSCE to gain traction on these questions unless political leaders care.