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Intra-OSCE arms transfers

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In recent times the perceived security of some OSCE member countries has been disturbed by proposed large-scale arms transfers between other member countries.

Three examples will suffice. Firstly, Russia has been unsettled by proposals for an anti-missile system based in Europe; secondly, Georgia and the Baltic nations have been concerned by Russia's desire to purchase from France 'Mistral' class amphibious assault, command and force projection ships (or their equivalents); thirdly, earlier, Russia was aggrieved by the fact that some OSCE member countries supplied Georgia with modern armaments.

What is at issue here is not genuine threats to the security of OSCE members, but perceptions of threats. If these perceptions could be allayed a more stable, constructive and cohesive security climate could be established.

These perceptions arise to a large extent from a lack of transparency. There has been inadequate explanation of why the acquisition of the new systems is thought to be essential to the security of the parties involved. Thus, in the case of the Russian and the 'Mistral' class ships there has been a lack of explanation of why exactly the ships are needed and how they will contribute to the country's overall security strategy.

What is required is an agreed mechanism within the OSCE for exchanging information about proposed arms acquisition having the potential to be perceived as threatening to the security of other member countries. This is a problem that relates almost exclusively to the proposed acquisition of large-scale systems: it should not be difficult to establish thresholds above which the mechanism can apply at the request of one or more member countries.

The OSCE is rightly concerned about threats to security arising from outside its ranks. All member countries can only benefit from measures to reduce perceptions of insecurity arising from intra-OSCE relations.