

OSCE: In Greater Demand Than Ever

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If the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) did not exist, there would be loud demands, given the challenges the continent faces and the tensions between countries within it, to create a new platform for dialogue. It is hard, after all, to think of a time in recent decades when the need for cooperation and security has been greater.

Terrorism and extremism, as we have seen again tragically in the horrific attacks in Paris, are a threat to the stability of all countries and the safety of our citizens. Violent conflict in Syria and Iraq has forced millions from their homes. Daish or ISIS have spread their tentacles from the Middle East to Africa and Afghanistan. Collective action is the only effective response.

Yet in many ways, we are further than ever from this goal. The trust needed to build consensus is missing. Instead we see new tensions and flashpoints almost every week, making this unity more difficult to reach.

To its critics, these major problems mean the OSCE has become an irrelevance. But it is important to remember its history before writing off the organisation. Formed in the depth of the Cold War, it provided the platform which, despite many obstacles and false starts, helped heal what were considered irreconcilable divisions.

We need to rediscover the same spirit and sense of confidence. Fortunately, we already have a solid foundation on which to build in the Helsinki Final Act, numerous other documents, and, most certainly, the Astana Declaration of 2010. It was only five years ago that the leaders of the 56 OSCE member countries came to Kazakhstan and pledged to step up their efforts to create “a free, democratic, common and indivisible Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security community stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok.”

At the heart of the declaration – described by the OSCE itself as a milestone in its development – was the recognition that “the security of each participating state is inseparably linked to the security of all other participating states.” It was an understanding that, in an increasingly inter-connected and complex world, we sink or swim together.

This does not mean, of course, that countries will always take the same view. We all have our own national interests. But what is needed are the right early warning systems and processes to enhance trust which prevent these differences from escalating into conflict.

Putting in place the right legal structures and mechanisms to achieve these goals must be at the top of the agenda of the OSCE ministerial council on Dec. 3–4 in Belgrade. There have been too many delays in drawing up the reforms needed to take the Astana Declaration forward.

While immediate political and military problems will, understandably, be at the forefront of the minds of foreign ministers heading to Serbia, they must not forget economic and environmental challenges. This is not just because of their importance in themselves but also because economic turmoil, lack of opportunity, unequal development, water

shortages and land degradation are increasingly root causes of conflict. (These are areas in which OSCE incoming chairman-in-office for 2016, Germany, has vast experience.)

It is also why President Nursultan Nazarbayev's call at the UN last September for countries to divert 1 percent of their military budgets to support the global Sustainable Development Goals deserves widespread support. Money spent wisely on promoting green sustainable policies now will prevent far greater sums having to be spent in the future.

The OSCE brings together 57 countries from three continents. It has deep experience and expertise. We must harness its potential to prevent conflict, increase cooperation and drive progress not just in participating states but across the world. In order to deliver these goals, we need to see a re-awakening of the spirit behind the Astana Declaration.