

Give Regional Cooperation a Chance

by Solange Fernex

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As the recent events in Kosovo have shown, an alternative to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is essential. That alternative is already in place: it is the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. From October 1998 to March 1999, OSCE could have been the solution to the Kosovo crisis.

In October, Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic had agreed to the immediate presence of 2000 OSCE observers; instead, only about 1400 insufficiently equipped, trained, and funded observers eventually arrived, due to the reluctance of OSCE's member states -- especially the wealthier NATO members.

When Milosevic refused to sign the peace agreement in March 1999, an OSCE-mandated international peacekeeping force including US and Canadian troops could have been deployed, since OSCE is the UN's regional organization. Russia could not have objected; as an OSCE member, it was welcome to send peacekeepers to Kosovo. Instead, OSCE had to withdraw on March 19; NATO bombed Kosovo and Serbia, and OSCE has only been allowed back since June.

NATO was not a solution in Kosovo, but an important part of the problem. While Russia agreed with the necessity of a peace agreement in Kosovo, any NATO intervention was bound to meet with Russian opposition and strengthen anti-Western positions in Russia, Serbia, and elsewhere. As a result, great harm was done.

Why is it possible to spend millions for one air strike and engage thousands of naval, air, and communications personnel within a single day, but impossible to mobilize enough OSCE observers in time to gain a civilized peace? As OSCE's current Chairman-in-Office, Knud Vollebaeck, has declared, "We must see to it that we learn to take action in time, before conflicts become brutal and devastating wars. We must learn the basic and simple lesson that prevention of conflicts costs less in all respects than stopping them and rebuilding societies."

What is OSCE? It was established as a global confidence-building structure by the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, with input from both Western bloc and Warsaw Pact nations. Its principles are respect for human rights, the fostering of tolerance and reconciliation, the building of modern democratic societies, and disarmament. Its membership consists of 54 states, including the US and Canada; the majority are non-NATO members, including neutral states like Austria, Switzerland, Finland, and Ireland.

OSCE is chaired by a troika which changes annually, consisting of the former, current, and future Chairman-in-Office (CIO). Currently Norway is CIO, together with Poland (1998) and Austria (2000). The Secretariat is based in Vienna, the Information Office in Prague, the Office for Human Rights in Warsaw, and the High Commissioner for Minorities in the Hague. Weekly meetings take place in Vienna, and seminars are organized year-round in individual regions. The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly meets each July in the capital of a member state; this year it met in St. Petersburg.

OSCE addresses three areas: Economic Affairs, Science, Technology, and Environment; Democracy, Human Rights, and Humanitarian Questions; and Political Affairs and Security, including confidence- and security-building measures, arms reduction, peacekeeping, conflict prevention, crisis management, and peaceful settlement of disputes. The Helsinki Document 1992 states that peacekeeping constitutes an important element of OSCE's capability for conflict prevention and crisis management, and may be undertaken in cases of conflict within or among participating states to help maintain peace and stability in support of ongoing efforts at a political solution. So far, however, this option has not been used.

After 1989, when the Warsaw Pact dissolved, many hoped that NATO would follow suit and that OSCE would remain Europe's only security structure, reinforced financially and politically. In spite of a hopeful relaunch of OSCE in Paris in 1990, this has not been the case. OSCE's budget is one thousand times smaller than that of NATO, although OSCE has 54 member states and NATO 19; its richest and mightiest members have succeeded in keeping OSCE as marginal and ineffective as possible. In 1994, the OSCE Budapest Summit stated that OSCE, as the UN's regional organization, would undertake a comprehensive process leading to a "Cooperative European Security Structure for the 21st Century." This work is currently underway, but faces opposition, especially from NATO states who want to reduce OSCE's role.

Opposition notwithstanding, the Charter of this initiative is slated for signature in November 1999 at the Istanbul Summit of the OSCE heads of state. The Charter recognizes the need to take into account the global and cooperative character of security, which can no longer be considered a purely military issue. As of this writing, the draft Charter has still not been made public; in order to have input, NGOs in the democratic, civil rights, and peace movements, especially in the US, Canada, and NATO states, should request a copy of the draft Charter from their Foreign Office or State Department. OSCE needs our strong and committed support.