

The Astana Summit: A Triumph of Common Sense

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A great deal of financial and political capital was invested in the OSCE Astana Summit which took place on 1 and 2 December 2010. But was it worth it? What is the significance of this first OSCE Summit in 11 years, and where does the Organization go from here?

A success for Kazakhstan

Evaluating the outcome of the Astana Summit depends on how one measures success. For Kazakhstan, the very fact that it hosted the Summit was a success. Bear in mind that only three years ago, several states had expressed doubts about Kazakhstan's suitability to chair the OSCE, and when that hurdle was overcome there was scepticism about the merits of holding a summit, and about the suitability of Astana as a venue.

The Summit was well organized. There was significant high-level participation despite the distance, the weather (snow storms across Europe) and the fact that a NATO Summit had been held in Lisbon less than two weeks earlier. Kazakhstan managed to shift the OSCE community's attention to Eurasia. There was an active and open dialogue among civil society in the build-up to the Summit: Kazakhstan organized an NGO Forum ahead of the Astana leg of the Review Conference, while other civil society representatives independently organized a parallel conference in Astana, again with the support of Kazakhstan, in the days between the Review Conference and the Summit. The biggest accomplishment was brokering consensus on a political declaration: the first high-level consensus document in the OSCE in eight years. So the Kazakhs can claim a positive outcome. But was the Summit a success for the OSCE?

Towards a security community?

Despite the fact that this was the first OSCE Summit for eleven years (since Istanbul in 1999), participating States had little time to prepare. The decision to hold the Summit in Astana was only taken in August. Taking into account the inevitable summer recess, the participating States effectively had three months to get ready.

Preparations included a series of Review Conference meetings: in Warsaw, Vienna and Astana. These meetings were hardly an inter-active dialogue on the implementation of OSCE commitments. Rather, they were a series of monologues on national efforts to uphold OSCE principles, or a reiteration of proposals that had been made in the framework of the Corfu Process. The latter, initiated by the Greek Chairmanship in the summer of 2009, consisted of a series of informal meetings that generated ideas on how to improve the OSCE's effectiveness across the full range of its work.

In the build-up to previous Summits, Review Conferences and Preparatory Meetings were used to draft decisions to be taken by OSCE heads of state or government. That was not to be the case in the lead-up to Astana, since the time was so short and the only deliverables were to be a political declaration and an action plan — and these were being drafted by the Chair (with considerable help from the Secretariat), not by the participating States. The first draft of the Astana Summit Document was approximately fifteen pages long, and was comprised of three sections: a retrospective section that recalled shared principles and commitments (commemorating the 35th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act and the 20th anniversary of the Charter of Paris); a section on shared priorities and objectives; and a future-oriented "action plan". By the time the delegations arrived in Astana, it had been agreed to merge the second and third sections in order to cut down on a lengthy list of current challenges (including some on which the participating States could not agree), to shorten the document (to 11 pages), and to make it more action-oriented and readable.

The drafting process highlighted a few interesting trends. Firstly, the Secretariat and the Chairmanship were driving the process, rather than just brokering it. Secondly, the European Union, the United States and the Russian Federation worked closely together to narrow their differences. Thirdly, some states that were not part of this group felt that they were being marginalized, and therefore took a tough line in the drafting committee in order to make their voices heard. Fourthly, as one of the first tests of the Common Foreign and Security Policy since the Lisbon Treaty, the European Union tried hard to speak with one voice, but was not always successful.

Consensus breaks down

By the time the Summit officially opened on 1 December, the participating States were far from having reached a consensus. Nevertheless, the speeches in the plenary by leaders from the OSCE states struck a positive note: praising Kazakhstan's Chairmanship; reaffirming adherence to OSCE commitments; underscoring the importance of realizing the shared vision of a Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security community; and stressing the urgency of adapting to new threats and challenges. The host, President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, captured the mood when he called the Summit 'a triumph of common sense'. Meanwhile, in the Preparatory Committee, work continued on the Astana Declaration and the Framework for Action. Progress was slow on the Framework, with states tending to treat the draft as a Christmas tree for hanging new ideas rather than a fruit-bearing tree that needed pruning. Nevertheless, consensus was building around issues like improving the OSCE's capacities in all phases of the conflict cycle, strengthening the OSCE's response to transnational threats, bolstering the Organization's cooperation with Afghanistan, and enhancing the OSCE's economic and environmental dimension. It even seemed possible that there would be agreement on further examining ways to endow the OSCE with a legal personality.

Yet problems were also becoming evident. Some countries (in the EU and North America) were taking maximalist positions on the human dimension, whereas others (in the CIS) were trying to tone down references to human rights and fundamental freedoms. The red line for many on both sides was a repetition of language from the 1991 Moscow Document that says 'we reaffirm categorically and irrevocably that commitments undertaken in the field of the human dimension are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the State concerned'. Some states objected to an inclusion of this reference, while others said that they could not agree to a document that did not contain this language.

The other serious fault line was a reference to conflicts in Georgia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Moldova was less of an issue since there was no clear winner from the elections on 28 November, so the situation remained in a state of flux. Kyrgyzstan was hardly mentioned. Concerning Georgia, President Saakashvili reiterated his pledge on the non-use of force that he had made to the European Parliament on 23 November. However, the main sticking point was a reference to the territorial integrity of Georgia within internationally recognized borders. Speaking to the Russian news agency Ria Novosti on 8 December, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that it was 'totally unrealistic', even 'blasphemous' for some countries to insist that South Ossetia and Abkhazia are still part of Georgia. 'The impression was that we were not holding talks on 2 December 2010, but on 6 August 2008'.

The situation was even more difficult in relation to the crisis in Nagorno Karabakh. Despite the fact that, on 1 December, the Heads of Delegation of the OSCE Minsk Co-Chair countries (France, the United States and Russia) had made a Joint Statement with the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the feuding sides could

not agree on language to be included in the Astana document.

The lack of consensus on wording concerning conflicts was holding up consensus on a text from the Forum for Security Cooperation (FSC). It was expected that the FSC would come up with a text on updating the 1999 Vienna Document, and enhancing the OSCE's work in key areas like the Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security, Small Arms and Light Weapons and Stockpiles of Conventional Ammunition, as well as the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. But progress in the politico-military dimension was held hostage by at least one country that was disgruntled over the conflicts issue. The only breakthrough came in the Joint Consultative Group, which agreed on a text (that was subsequently inserted into the draft political declaration) recognizing intensified efforts to overcome the current impasse concerning the implementation of the CFE Treaty and the Agreement on its Adaptation (ACFE), and which expressed support for ongoing consultations aiming at opening the way for negotiations on the ACFE in 2011.

And so, as has happened so many times in the past decade, a major OSCE meeting looked like it would collapse because of a failure to find common ground on dealing with crises in Georgia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Summit was scheduled to finish around noon on 2 December. Yet even after the list of speakers was exhausted, there was no consensus on a final text. The OSCE stood on the brink of failure, and risked succumbing to the lowest common denominator. The Kazakhs must have been thinking that reaching the Summit was a Sisyphus task.

To rescue the situation, it was decided to drop the Framework for Action and focus on a solid political declaration. After several hours of often contentious debate, bilaterals, and high-level telephone calls, consensus was reached.

A triumph of common sense

Just past midnight, as 2 December slipped into 3 December, President Nazarbayev dropped the gavel on the adoption of the Astana Commemorative Declaration: Towards a Security Community. In the end this was the triumph of common sense that he had called for in his opening statement.

The media, unfortunately, did not see it that way. Having waited around for twelve hours and then having heard a number of rather negative 'interpretative statements', the Summit was portrayed in the press as a missed opportunity.

Yet the Astana Declaration identifies considerable common ground on which OSCE participating States are prepared to move forward. It reaffirms fundamental principles, and strengthens the sense of ownership for commonly undertaken commitments among all 56 participating States.

As most of the language is recycled from previous OSCE texts, it is fair to ask why the Declaration is important. Yet the answer is clear: in an Organization like the OSCE, where commitments are political rather than legally binding in nature, the fact that key OSCE commitments, particularly in the human dimension, are reaffirmed by a new generation of political leaders, and that this is done in Astana, matters. It is like renewing vows after a decade of having gone astray. What is more, many of the commitments enshrined in the Astana Declaration — notably including the controversial Moscow Document language — were affirmed in Astana for the very first time at the level of heads of state and government. This also matters.

The challenge now is to build on the momentum of the ‘spirit of Astana’. In the immediate future, it is up to Lithuania (as the Chairmanship-in-Office in 2011) to determine how to do this. Without an agreed Framework for Action, the incoming Chairmanship must work hard to give substance to the language of the Astana declaration that says ‘The time has now come to act, and we must define concrete and tangible goals in addressing these challenges’. That blueprint remains on the drawing board. Yet there is enough that can be salvaged to be used as the basis for possible deliverables for the Vilnius Ministerial which will be held on 6-7 December 2011.

Where does the OSCE go from here?

On the one hand, the OSCE had a near death experience in Astana. The very fact that it was willed back into life shows that there is enough political will to keep it alive. On the other hand, the Astana Summit demonstrated that there is considerable common ground on which to build the future of the OSCE.


Clearly, the time is not ripe for a master plan. Rather, participating States seem more interested in getting more value out of existing institutions and structures, and taking small pragmatic steps to improve security and cooperation.

Lithuania, with considerably fewer resources than Kazakhstan, will have its hands full in 2011 with electing a new Secretary General (and filling several other senior positions), warming up the leftovers from Astana, following through on efforts to enhance stability in Kyrgyzstan and energizing mediation processes in Moldova, Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. It may even have to calm down the situation in neighbouring Belarus. This will leave little time to focus on national priorities like freedom of the media, cyber security, sub-regional cooperation, and energy security. Perhaps there can be breakthroughs on the Vienna Document, a stronger operational response to transnational threats, a regional strategy to contain a spill-over of instability from Afghanistan, and progress on endowing the Organization with legal personality.

After the glitz and glamour of 2010, the OSCE will return to regular business in 2011. That business is still essential for building security and cooperation in Europe. The Astana Summit, and a year of Kazakhstan’s OSCE Chairmanship reminded us that Europe’s security cannot end at the eastern border of the EU, or at the Urals. It helped to identify a common long-term vision of a free, democratic, common and indivisible Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian Security Community. Yet it highlighted some of the obstacles that still hinder the realization of that vision. It will take time to overcome those obstacles.

The next three Chairmanships — Lithuania, Ireland and Ukraine — (working with a new Secretary General) will not necessarily have the same resources and ambition as Kazakhstan. But by using ideas that have been generated in the past two years, building on the sense of common purpose that was evident in Kazakhstan, and focusing on what the OSCE does best, they can adapt the OSCE to a world that is considerably different from 1975 (when the CSCE began) and 1990 (after the revolutionary changes in Europe), and lead participating States towards the realization of a European security community where states are at peace, and respect their commitments to their people and each other.

Whatever happens in the future, Astana will be considered a turning point in the history of the OSCE. Either it was the beginning of a new era, or the beginning of the end.



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Security and Human Rights (formerly Helsinki Monitor) is a journal devoted to issues inspired by the work and principles of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It looks at the challenge of building security through cooperation across the northern hemisphere, from Vancouver to Vladivostok, as well as how this experience can be applied to other parts of the world. It aims to stimulate thinking on the question of protecting and promoting human rights in a world faced with serious threats to security.

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