

# Vienna Peace and Security Talks 2021

European Security:  
What Role Can and Should the  
OSCE, EU and NATO Play?

*Conference Paper*

## Summary

- The EU faces a number of geopolitical challenges, ranging from the US-China rivalry to the loss of faith in its own enlargement and neighborhood policies. However, it is still a powerful actor in geoeconomics. After the parliamentary elections in Germany and with good chances for the election of a pro-European government in France in 2022, there might be more room for shaping a robust Common Foreign and Security Policy.
  - The Summit between Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin in June 2021 is a positive signal against the background of the major deterioration in the West-Russia relations. By contrast, the lack of consensus on Russia among the EU members prevents Brussels from implementing its policy of selective engagement with Moscow.
  - The absence of dialogue within the OSCE reflects the overall crisis of multilateralism globally. While it will not be resolved without political will of participating states, cooperation in areas of common interest is still possible (*flexilateralism*), as well as stronger engagement with civil society and expert communities.
  - The status of permanent neutrality may become an interesting option for maintaining geopolitical and geoeconomic balance in the Black Sea region. It could also be beneficial to both, the West and Russia. But it is also important to understand that neutrality cannot be an end in itself. It is not a replacement for a robust state strategy. Nevertheless, a discussion can serve as a starting point and a catalyst for a conversation on the future of statehood, national interests of multi-ethnic communities, the role of the countries in the region, and relations with key actors on the international stage.
  - The idea of liberal democracy as the ultimate goal of political organization is being increasingly questioned. This will have and already has deep implications for the West's approach towards autocratic regimes.
  - In relation to China, there is a lack of policy coordination among Western partners. Primarily the US and the EU have different interests in relations with China. For the EU, it has been possible to cooperate with Beijing in economic terms, while still criticizing it for human rights abuses.
  - Russia-EU relations could gain a positive impetus if both sides understood commonalities in their situations in relation to the changing geopolitical structure and the main systemic conflict within it, namely between China and the US. Neither the EU, nor Russia are ready to be engaged in this competition.
  - US and NATO's twenty-year-long presence in Afghanistan with the intention to carry out a nation-building process and the war on terror have failed completely. This has undermined the US' as well as NATO's credibility around the world, putting in question Washington's role as a security and stability provider in other regions as well.
  - Considering the West's responsibility for the situation in Afghanistan, the West must help as many Afghan people, especially women, as possible. Also, evacuations from Afghanistan to Europe need to be discussed.
-

## Context

The European security system is in deep crisis, facing difficult times, major challenges, and a myriad of hybrid threats: armed or frozen conflicts in the EU's Eastern and Southern neighborhood, the global migration crisis, systemic terrorism, pervasive cyber threats, and the return of the forgotten conflict with Russia. All these developments are taking place against the backdrop of profound changes in the international order, the rise of Asia, and a redefinition of the global role of the USA.

The downward spiral in the European security architecture is also reflected in the crisis of the OSCE. Because of the spirit of confrontation within the OSCE between Russia and its allies on one hand, and the Western states on the other, the organization's decision-making mechanisms are far too often paralyzed. The OSCE participating states are hardly able to find the necessary consensus even when it comes to decisions of minor importance.

Furthermore, the undignified withdrawal of NATO from Afghanistan demonstrated the limits of this potentially powerful organization. It also made clear – yet for another time – that the EU lacks strategic autonomy and depends on the US' capabilities and leadership. When Washington acts against European interests – especially on peace and security matters – the EU often fails to find the will and means to pursue its own foreign and security policy.

The third edition of *Vienna Peace and Security Talks* intended to provide an insight into the interests and motivations of actors central to pan-European security. Such insight is imperative for creating the necessary conditions for the development of a serious critical dialogue. For its part, a critical dialogue at eye level is one of the basic prerequisites for the constructive solution processes to numerous regional and global conflicts and crises.

### Workshop 1: Revitalizing security in the OSCE area, how it is done and by whom?

The lack of urgency to think about European security represents a major challenge nowadays. A cooperative security approach is needed. In the short term, it should address managing relations, based on interests, rules, and – ideally – common values in order to reduce the existing risks. In the medium-term, pressing issues such as disarmament, climate change, migration, and terrorism, should be tackled. In the long-term, strategic questions must be asked: what is expected from European security?

*The situation is serious,  
but not hopeless.*

#### *Where is the EU at?*

The EU has gone through a crisis which, however, resulted in several positive common decisions, such as on a European Health Union and combatting climate change. At the same time, foreign policy remained the area where the EU has not improved its performance. The EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy runs in parallel to national foreign policies of individual Member States and the latter ones are given priority. There is also a lack of ambition to have a robust European foreign policy. Many smaller Member States have never had a foreign policy that would go beyond their neighborhood. In international matters, they prefer to do nothing rather than give the mandate to the EU. Furthermore, dependency on the United States is persisting, even though after the American withdrawal from Afghanistan it has become clear that one cannot fully rely on the US. Nevertheless, many EU Eastern members prefer the US' security guarantees to the EU's.

Coherence inside the EU has decreased in the last decade, with a number of members being more willing to block consensus in the EU. The enlargement policy has also lost its weight. This is partly due to the slow, if not absent, reform progress in the candidate countries. The primary reason, however, is that the EU stopped engaging with them in a serious way and lost faith in enlargement. The Eastern Partnership has not had a better track record, with two countries of the region – Armenia and Azerbaijan – going into war with each other in 2020, while Belarus’ authorities are effectively at war against the country’s population. Inside the EU, there has also been little appetite for reform. No treaty changes or institutional innovations are in sight.

Despite geopolitical challenges, there are several silver linings. The EU has remained a powerful actor in geoeconomics, exporting its norms and standards in the digital area, trade, and climate diplomacy. The US-China rivalry, even if potentially dangerous, can serve as an impetus for Brussels to develop a coherent strategy towards Beijing. Finally, the upcoming German parliamentary elections are likely to result in a very pro-European government. With Emmanuel Macron having good chances to be reelected in France in 2022 as well, the political constellation in the EU next year might be conducive to shaping a new common foreign policy.

The Strategic Compass of the EU will be presented in November by Josep Borrell. It is a two-year process with the aim to find a common strategy for the EU for the horizon of 2030. All the challenges named above will come to light. It will be an opportunity to see whether Member States will be able to give the EU capacity to act as a security provider.

Europeans should look at more flexible formats of cooperation. While competition between big EU members exists, for example between France, Germany, and Spain, there has been more cooperation than competition among the capitals.

### *Russia-West relations in European security*

Lack of trust among major stakeholders in European security has become evident. Russia and the West have experienced a major deterioration in relations which has translated into polarization, a decrease of exchanges (even on the expert level), and severe stigmatization of those who keep their channels open.

***Political will to find common ground is missing.***

Against this background, the summit between Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden in June has been a positive development. Strategic stability talks were established as a result, with the first round having already taken place. It is notable that these discussions are not held under the UN auspices but happen in a bilateral format in Geneva. The choice of summit location highlights the importance of neutral states for such exchanges.

The EU and Russia have unrealistic expectations from each other. The political will to find common ground is missing. EU sanctions and Western pressure led to the marginalization and isolation of Russia, pushing Moscow to undertake a more aggressive foreign policy.

The EU still has a valid policy of selective engagement in specific areas (‘islands of cooperation’) towards Russia, but it is not implemented due to divergences inside the EU. While Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron tried to initiate cooperation with Moscow, it has met with the opposition of the eastern EU members, as well as disinterest from the Russian side. Russia preferred bilateral relations with individual EU member states.

A cooperative security approach is needed. It should be supported by think tanks, NGOs, and civil society at large. It is in the interest of all states to stop increasing their security at cost of others. Furthermore, more work needs to be done to increase the exposure of the Russian public to western values and norms. Participation of experts in dialogue events, the issue of visa liberalization, and vaccine recognition should be addressed.

### *The OSCE and the crisis of multilateralism*

The future of multilateralism looks bleak. Many multilateral institutions were a product of the end of WWII. The sense of their value has been lost with time and it will be difficult to reenergize them. The nature of the US leadership has also taken a different shape and is being increasingly questioned. Western values are not any longer accepted as universal.

Dialogue on common challenges has become impossible at the OSCE. Dialogue needs empathy and preparedness to listen. Nowadays, there is hardly any dialogue in the OSCE, taking positions is common. Many diplomats are under strong instructions from their capitals and cannot negotiate. Dialogue is important, but what we really need is negotiations on substantial questions.

Apart from that, there is also a lack of common understanding of the challenges themselves. While the EU and the USA still have many common interests and areas of cooperation, they will nevertheless grow apart, with the US increasingly focusing on Asian, rather than European security.

***Confidence building is crucial.***

*Flexilateralism* might be a fitting approach to sustain some level of cooperation. It presupposes building coalitions on topics where cooperation is still possible. For example, addressing climate change is in the interest of everyone.

Research helps generate new ideas and shared understandings. Some OSCE practices are based on non-tested assumptions. Few researchers study the OSCE due to various reasons, including pressure from autocratic participating states, difficulties with collecting data, and lack of transparency. Democratic participating states can support researchers from autocratic countries in the OSCE area as well as signal to the OSCE institutions to be more transparent.

In the end, civil society alone cannot reenergize the OSCE. This depends on the political will of governments.

## **Workshop 2: OSCE's roadmap to 2025. How can the current trend be reversed?**

### *OSCE Roadmap 2025*

The OSCE today reminds of the bloc structure during the Cold War, with the USSR and its satellites on one side and the USA and like-minded states, on the other. Today the West is represented mainly by NATO and the USA. The voices of non-NATO European states are rarely heard. Diplomats at the OSCE need to talk more to their capitals expressing their opinions and keeping backdoor channels open, instead of simply reporting from the capitals to the OSCE. If there is no progress, withdrawal of countries from this organization is inevitable.

One cannot reinvigorate the OSCE without taking the global context into account. Today the US-China rivalry is the central axis of geopolitics. The OSCE is left with a niche function.

The crisis of multilateralism is caused not only by growing unilateralism but also by reduced political and financial investment into multilateral organizations. Thomas Greminger's reform agenda fit-for-purpose suggests how the OSCE's guiding principles can be put to work in these new circumstances.

Many capitals and NGOs are sympathetic with the idea of holding an OSCE Summit in Helsinki in 2025 in the spirit of the 1975 conference. At the same time, this is not the first attempt to revitalize the role of the OSCE through holding an anniversary summit. One can recall the Corfu process and the Helsinki 40 plus. By 2025, one should not expect a big summit, but it will already be an achievement if parties will still be willing to sit at one table.

The recent debates in the OSCE are no longer security-centered, but human rights-centered. The original three baskets were almost completely replaced by one, namely the human rights dimension. The OSCE offices in Central Asia have been downgraded because of their almost sole focus on human rights. Russia and Kazakhstan are participating states, but they cannot influence the agenda of the organization. This fuels the OSCE's internal crisis. It is necessary to discuss the rebalancing of the three dimensions within the organization's activities, finding more cooperation on the economic dimension.

***'Pragmatism,  
compromises, and  
politics of small steps.'***

Cooperation on small issues whenever possible, pragmatism, compromises, as well as keeping the expectations low should become the approach of the OSCE participating states to dealing with each other. The realization that no party is keen on war is particularly useful for military risk reduction. In this respect, confidence-building measures are crucial.

Climate change is cited as a potential area of common interest. However, there is no real agreement among 57 nations on what climate change is and how it was caused. It might not be the easiest area to start the dialogue. The Women Peace and Security Agenda could be another area of common interest, but Eastern states are not keen on discussing it.

### *Neutrality for small states?*

The current polarization in the OSCE and globally leaves small states with few choices. They can either bandwagon with big powers or declare themselves neutral and stay out of the big power conflict. A survey in March 2021 by the European Council on Foreign Relations that asked about EU citizens' preferences in case of conflict between China and the US showed that 60-65% would prefer the EU to stay neutral rather than join any side.

The Austrian model of neutrality can also serve as an example for many small states ('countries in-between') in the OSCE area where Russian troops are deployed, for example in Moldova. The choice for them is to either bandwagon with the West, Russia, or declare permanent neutrality.

Permanent neutrality, however, is not a remedy for the 'in-between' states' internal problems. Neither does it prescribe a specific foreign policy course. In addition, the difference to the Austrian case is that the small states in question are next to the Russian border. Belarus is a case in point. The geopolitical attitudes of the population in this country prioritize neutrality very

clearly. However, Russia would never accept that, as Belarus is perceived as a buffer zone between Russia and NATO.

## **Workshop 3: Cooperation with autocracies. Do we need this?**

### *Liberal democracy in crisis*

The idea of the US as a global norms enforcer is in crisis. This has implications for liberal democracy as a form of political organization as such. Liberal democracy has been previously perceived as the end goal. Now it is being increasingly questioned. By withdrawing from Afghanistan, the US has indirectly accepted the Taliban rule. In this situation, why not to accept the rule of the Communist party in China which Washington still seems to want to change?

‘Liberal democracy versus autocracy’ is a flawed contraposition, as applied to contemporary political systems. During the Cold War, there was a genuine competition of models. Today, there is none. Rather, the situation seems to have become much more complex. Today authoritarian political systems combine autocratic and democratic features. Such model is often referred to as a plebiscitary democracy where legitimacy of the existing (largely unchangeable) system is based on regular plebiscites (elections). Russia is exploiting this model more than others. But it will backfire everywhere.

### *China*

The question of how the West should deal with China requires first clarification of what is understood by the West. The limits of policy coordination among Western countries have become increasingly obvious. The recent security treaty among the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia to counter China has demonstrated how the US imagines engagement in Asia – there is no place for small states in it.

The EU’s perception of China differs from the American one. From the EU’s perspective, relations should not be reduced to the great power conflict. For example, while the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is not essential for the EU itself (as its members are capable of building their own infrastructure), China is taking the risk of investing in less secure and financially unsustainable places, thereby potentially contributing to conflict resolution through economic development.

*‘Separating political and economic relations is a reasonable but at the same time contested approach.’*

The best way for the EU to deal with the BRI is to engage with it, making proactive offers. In Afghanistan, China could fill the gap in development aid and building infrastructure which is not fundamentally opposed to the EU’s interest.

Nevertheless, the following should be taken into account. Despite legitimate EU economic interests in cooperation with China, criticism of obvious human rights violations must be maintained, indeed intensified.

### *Russia*

Russia-EU relations could gain a positive impetus if both sides understood commonalities in their situations in relation to the changing geopolitical structure and the main systemic conflict

within it, namely between China and the US. Neither the EU nor Russia are ready to be engaged in this competition.

The deterioration of the EU-Russia relations is partly caused by the crisis in the foreign policy identity of both. The EU, more than any other project in European history, represents the idea of Europeanism and claims for itself the interpretative authority over the requirements for a truly European state. It is precisely the latter that is not accepted by the majority of Russia's foreign policy elites. Russia sees itself as a European power, in historical, cultural, and other terms. However, it is implied that to be truly European one needs to strive for EU membership. For the EU, the crisis of the Europeanization agenda produces similar identity issues. If those are overcome on both sides, more room for a positive political agenda will become available. However, this rapprochement would only make sense towards a far less repressive regime in post-Putin Russia.

Both the EU and Russia underestimate each other's potential in international relations. Russia thinks that the EU is not sovereign in its foreign policy and unable to achieve strategic autonomy from the USA. Furthermore, NATO is considered by Moscow solely as a platform for US' interests and influence in Europe and for that as a strategic challenge and even a military threat. In the EU, there is a perception that the Russian political regime is not stable and will collapse soon, while Russia's strategic position vis-à-vis China remains weak. Thus, Moscow is viewed as naïve in thinking it can become an equal partner for Beijing.

The OSCE is important for Russia because this is virtually the only multilateral framework that has Russia alongside the US and EU countries as an equal partner.

## **Public panel: European Security: Fallout from Afghanistan - Lessons for EU, OSCE, and NATO**

*Daniel Hamilton, Director of Global Europe Program at the Wilson Center & Austrian Marshall Plan Foundation Distinguished Fellow:*

It must be acknowledged that from the beginning on the US had two different strategies in Afghanistan. One was to counter terrorism and exterminate Al Qaeda. The other was nation-

***'After Afghanistan failure, the US will not allow itself to be involved in any mission outside its immediate area of concern.'***

*Bruno Maçães*

building. Neither of the strategies was properly implemented. Donald Trump started to negotiate with the Taliban. Those negotiations undermined the credibility of the Afghan government. At the same time, massive corruption within the government must also be recognized.

After the US' withdrawal, the situation is not a clear win-lose for Americans, Russians, or Chinese. China and Russia are concerned with jihadi terrorism that can spill over their borders and to Central Asia. There are also concerns about the drug trade. The economic collapse in Afghanistan is also dangerous. China's previous attempts to pour money into the Afghan economy have not worked. The situation is not a win for the Taliban either, as they are now facing difficulties with governing.

Strategic autonomy of the EU is not a question of years, but of decades. As it stands now, Europeans simply lack capabilities, efforts and investments. Currently, the EU largely depends



on US military capabilities. However, the US are willing to accept the EU as first respondent in crisis situations in Europe and its neighborhood.

*Clarisse Pasztory, Deputy Head of the OSCE presence in Albania, former Head of EU Liaison Office, Erbil, Iraq:*

When working in a conflict environment, one needs to have a clear strategy. This was not the case with the US in Afghanistan. It is also impossible, even paradoxical, to try to impose democracy. Institutions and rule of law are necessary preconditions. The EU and the OSCE used to be better at creating longevity of institutions.

In principle, it is a good idea to engage the OSCE in Afghanistan. Practically, given the internal weaknesses of the organization, it would hardly be possible. The OSCE came into being two decades after the emergence of blocs. Later, blocs were replaced by the so-called TTTTs: temporary, tactical, transactional, topical interactions. Today, the OSCE reminds of a platform for monologues of states, rather than for dialogue among them.

*Bruno Maçães, Senior Advisor, Flint Global, London; Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute, Washington DC; former Europe Minister of Portugal (2013-2015):*

Nation-building is presented as a project of transforming Afghanistan into a liberal democracy. This is not what happened. The US lost the war, there was no nation-building over the past years. The United States were trying to establish conditions for their exit, creating an appearance that the war is taking place between the Afghan government and the insurgency, where the US was just a bystander.

Twenty years of US presence in Afghanistan have left nothing. This raises serious doubts about the situation in other places where the US has been expected to provide some sort of stability, including in the Middle East, Northern Africa, and the Eastern Neighborhood. After the Afghanistan failure, the US will not allow itself to be involved in any mission outside its immediate area of concern.

The chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan leads to reduced trust in US power in many European capitals. However, strategic autonomy will be a very gradual, almost imperceptible process, since Europe simply lacks capabilities.

*Lejla Visnjic, General Secretary of the Socialist Youth Austria:*

I have always been critical of the military intervention in Afghanistan. Wars are made because some people profit from them. It is important to talk about what to do now, how we can help people, especially the women in this country. We need to save as many people as possible, evacuations from Afghanistan to Europe need to be organized.

---

*The conference was held on 20 September 2021. The workshops took place under the Chatham House rule. They were attended by a variety of stakeholders from multilateral institutions, academia, and think tanks. The panel discussion in the evening was open to the public. Its recording can be accessed [here](#). The organizers would like to thank all participants of the conference for their active engagement and valuable inputs.*

For any inquiries, please contact: [office@iip.at](mailto:office@iip.at)