



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

VII Moscow Conference on International Security

“Take a step towards peace”

Statement by Secretary General Thomas Greminger

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Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am grateful to take part in this meeting.

Since becoming Secretary General of the OSCE last summer, I have attended a number of security conferences. I have been disappointed at the lack of meaningful dialogue in many of these meetings. Too often, they are used to repeat well-known positions. And to focus on problems.

We need to get out of our echo chambers – and look for solutions.

That is my challenge to you today. How to stimulate meaningful dialogue. To listen. To understand. And how to de-escalate tensions, rebuild trust, and move towards a more stable and cooperative European security community.

Instability, unpredictability and mistrust

Ten years ago, at the Munich Security Conference, President Putin warned of the consequences of a break-down of international order. He said at the time (and I quote):

“Today we are witnessing an almost uncontained hyper use of force – military force in international relations, force that is plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts”.

He warned of increasing disdain for the basic principles of international law.
And he warned of a coming arms race.

Sadly, all of this has come to pass.

Instability is compounded by the fact that the lines between war and peace have become blurred.

As General Gerasimov has pointed out, “The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of weapons in their effectiveness”. Perhaps this is the 21st century equivalent of Clausewitz’s famous saying that “war is merely the continuation of politics by other means”.

The break-down of a rules-based system is compounded by the weaponization of almost everything: trade; migration; information; cyber.

Furthermore, adversaries often operate in the shadows: in unrecognized regions; in cyber space; or as criminal or terrorist groups. More disturbing, sometimes these actors have close links to intelligence or military forces.

It can be hard to know what is true and what is not. Indeed, creating such fog is part of hybrid warfare. But there is a strong perception – and you know perceptions shape reality – of a marked increase in external attempts to influence elections, to support political parties, to spread disinformation, and even to carry out cyber attacks. If this perception is wrong, then it is all the more important to work to change it.

The result of all of these factors creates a high degree of unpredictability and instability– both within and between states. And it breaks down trust. This creates a vicious circle. Mistrust breeds unilateralism, and unilateralism deepens mistrust.

How do we break out of this dilemma?

Overall, what is missing is a common vision of what we want the future of the OSCE area to look like. I would argue that the most viable option is a Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security community as outlined at the 2010 Astana Summit. In an increasingly inter-connected world, states should realize the self-interest (as well as the collective interest) of working together. And relations must be rooted in the basic principles that have been the bedrock of European security since 1975, namely those of the Helsinki Final Act.

Achieving this goal will require a narrative of change, leadership, a more constructive tone on all sides, implementation of commitments in good faith, and greater empathy for each others’ security perceptions. And it will take time.

Rebuilding trust and confidence

But some things cannot wait. Urgent steps are needed to reduce tensions, and to prevent incidents or accidents from spiraling out of control. This will require a higher degree of mutual restraint, agreements on safe conduct, technical preventive and safety measures, resumption of regional co-operation, and reliable channels of communication.

Demilitarization on both sides is urgent. Aggressive force postures, snap exercises close to borders, and belligerent rhetoric are sending dangerous signals. What happens when aggressive deterrence meets a rapid response? In a nuclear age, the risks are unthinkable.

States – starting with their leaders – need to recommit to abstaining from the threat and use of force.

More dialogue is essential. Strange as it may seem, today there is less military to military dialogue than during the Cold War. There is also insufficient inter-action between the diplomatic and military communities. How can we understand each other if we are not listening? How can confidence be built if there is no contact?

The Structured Dialogue within the OSCE is a good place to start. This inter-state process was launched at the Hamburg Ministerial Council in December 2016. Designed to overcome the stalemate in politico-military security, it has already stimulated useful discussions on threat perceptions, force postures, and military doctrines. An important part of its success is due to the active participation of senior officials from defence and foreign ministries.

But talking is not enough. We need to get back to basics. There must be practical, verifiable steps to display willingness to cooperate.

Measures to build confidence and trust are essential, especially in sensitive areas. This includes exchanging information, and using mechanisms for consultation. At a minimum, parties should use existing confidence- and security-building measures in a trust-inducing way. Furthermore, steps should be taken to update these CSBMs, reflecting the interests of both sides and the realities of the 21st century.

Such measures are important in themselves, and could open up the possibility for longer term steps – like conventional arms control. I realize that won't happen tomorrow. But it should be our goal. And we should not let the lack of progress on big issues block small steps where our interests converge.

Dialogue and détente

Think of issues like violent extremism, terrorism, illicit trafficking of small arms and light weapons, cyber threats, and large flows of refugees and migrants. These challenges are common to all OSCE participating States and can only be tackled together. This is another reason why Russia and the West need to overcome their differences.

More generally, we need to replace the dangerous downward spiral of tit-for-tat reprisals with small, reciprocal steps that can address specific challenges in a pragmatic way. This can foster incremental progress, a solutions-based approach, and gradually restore constructive communication, predictability, and mutual trust.

A good example is cyber. Cyber attacks are a trust killer. The OSCE has a set of confidence-building measures that can reduce tensions resulting from the use of information and communication technologies. These have been agreed to by all 57 OSCE countries. Now they need to be implemented.

We should also intensify efforts to resolve protracted conflicts in the OSCE area. In some cases, the existing mediation formats can act as confidence-building measures in themselves.

For example, Russia, France and the United States are trying to find a peaceful solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as Co-chairs of the Minsk Group.

Or consider the Transdniestrian settlement process. The very countries that are quarrelling in neighboring Ukraine are working together constructively as mediators in Moldova. Recently, a number of practical measures have been agreed that will make life better for people living on both sides of the Dniestr river. So cooperation is possible. And it can generate a peace dividend.

Crisis in and around Ukraine

Of course, the biggest impediment to security and cooperation in Europe today is the crisis in and around Ukraine. The OSCE has had a Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine for the past four years. It is comprised of more than 700 unarmed civilians from over forty countries who are operating in a war zone. They are monitoring a ceasefire, including with cutting-edge technology (like cameras and drones). They are brokering local truces to enable the repair of critical infrastructure. And they are looking out for the needs of the local population.

Their reports are not encouraging – hundreds, sometimes thousands of ceasefire violations occur every day. A new political impulse is needed to get the parties to implement the Minsk Agreements. Minsk is the only game in town. There is also talk of a peace operation. Whatever form it may take – if it happens – the role and track record of the OSCE should not be over-looked. The OSCE has been on the ground for four years, knows the situation, has valuable experience and assets, and has proven its worth as an impartial observer and honest broker.

Co-operation, not confrontation

Colleagues, the conflict in eastern Ukraine is a symptom of a bigger crisis in European security. Indeed, the past twenty years have shown what happens when cooperation breaks down. If evidence were needed, it shows that our security is truly indivisible. Therefore, instead of going down a dead-end path of confrontation, all states should seek mutually beneficial cooperation.

As a global power in a globalized world, Russia has a major stake and a national interest in restoring a properly functioning international system. It should have a vested interest to be part of the European security architecture. And that architecture can only be robust if Russia is part of it.

To conclude, there is an urgent need to de-escalate tensions, strengthen compliance with a clear and shared set of rules, engage in dialogue to overcome differences, and take joint action against common threats and challenges. The OSCE can provide a forum, rules, and tools to do that. But it is up to states to take a step towards peace.

Thank you for your attention.