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Taking Russia at its Word

Why a return to the Istanbul talks and the principles of the CSCE Final Act could pave the way to peace and security in Europe

By Heinz Gärtner

In this blog post, Heinz Gärtner writes about how a return to the Istanbul talks and the principles of the CSCE Final Act could serve as a diplomatic basis for ending the war in Ukraine and creating long-term security in Europe.

Diplomacy takes precedence

Russia's violations of international obligations — including the Budapest Memorandum, the OSCE principles, and the UN Charter — have undermined confidence in peace and prompted NATO members to demand security guarantees for Ukraine.

Nevertheless, the statement “no peace at any price” is a capitulation of diplomacy. This price is not absolute but must be defined or negotiated. This applies to the West as well as to Russia.

Henry Kissinger defined diplomacy as “the prevailing will to advance through a series of steps, each of which is inevitably incomplete in relation to the ultimate goal.” But this also means that diplomacy must strive to prevent and end wars when all desired goals cannot be achieved or cannot be achieved immediately.

Russia must return to Istanbul

The reality after this war in Ukraine will be the same as after any war. Political borders will be drawn where the armies stand, regardless of whether on the basis of a peace agreement or a ceasefire. It was the Tehran Conference in 1943, not the Yalta Conference in



Quote: Gärtner, Taking Russia at its Word,
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1945, that determined the outline of the future Iron Curtain. To prevent a new Cold War that divided Germany and Korea, the war must be ended diplomatically, not militarily.

For a future peace agreement, President Putin cannot therefore have both: retaining the territories controlled by Russian troops and Ukraine renouncing NATO membership. But President Zelensky will also not achieve the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian territory and Ukraine's accession to NATO. The outcome will have to lie somewhere between these two positions.

Instead of continuing the war, President Putin must meet his own demands. The West should take him at his word. Moscow argues that the West prematurely ended the Istanbul talks in March/April 2022. A return to this framework would require reciprocal steps: a gradual withdrawal by Russia from the occupied territories in exchange for Ukraine's commitment to renounce NATO membership and the stationing of foreign troops. Russia rejects both. Any lasting agreement would also require Russia's involvement in a broader mechanism of security guarantees. The Istanbul conference had already prepared some proposals on this. In Istanbul, Ukraine's membership in the EU was also considered part of an agreement on security policy. NATO members must also understand that troop deployments and NATO membership alone cannot guarantee absolute security for Ukraine.

Preventing a new Iron Curtain

What steps could be taken to avert a permanent division of Ukraine by a new Iron Curtain? One model could be the CSCE process after 1975, which began at the height of the Cold War but ultimately led to the end of the division of Germany.

After the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968, the German government pursued such a creative strategy. The reformist communists led by Alexander Dubcek enjoyed great sympathy in Germany, especially among social democrats. The shock was great when the reform attempts were crushed by Soviet tanks. People wondered what would happen if Soviet troops did the same thing in East Germany. They wanted to prevent that at all costs. The Soviet invasion was strongly condemned. At the same time, Germany sought dialogue with Russia. A German delegation traveled to Moscow. A more fundamental solution was pursued. Moscow was offered talks on a collective security system in Europe, a demand that Moscow had repeatedly made. This was the beginning of the process of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). This process reached a preliminary climax with the Helsinki Final Act in 1975.



Quote: Gärtner, Taking Russia at its Word,
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Restoring Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty

The document emphasizes national sovereignty, the inviolability of borders, and respect for human rights. "The participating States will accordingly refrain from any action which constitutes a threat or direct or indirect use of force against another participating State. [...] They will also refrain from any violent reprisals in their mutual relations," the document states. The Soviet Union agreed to these principles.

Russia violated these principles by invading Ukraine, just as the Soviet Union did by invading Afghanistan in 1979 and pressuring Poland to impose martial law in 1981. Ultimately, however, principles proved more successful than force. Although the Final Act was criticized at the time as "unrealistic" and even viewed as "appeasement," it contained the seeds that contributed to the dissolution of communism and the softening of the Eastern Bloc. This opportunity arose when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union.

They also encouraged civil societies in Eastern European states. In Czechoslovakia, the opposition movement "Charter 77" was founded on the basis of these principles. The CSCE ruled out violent changes to borders but left open the possibility of a peaceful shift based on consensus and international law with regard to German reunification. On the basis of the Istanbul negotiations and the principles of the CSCE Final Act, Ukraine could regain its territorial integrity and sovereignty by peaceful means.

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