

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

Background

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is a multilateral political forum involving Canada, the United States and 53 countries of Europe and Central Asia. It grew out of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), which emerged from the Helsinki Conference of 1975 as a series of meetings to reduce Cold War tensions.

The CSCE process creates and monitors principles that guide relations between states, and it enforces military, economic, environmental and humanitarian commitments. The CSCE embodies what has come to be called "co-operative security."

With the end of the Cold War, many states looked to the CSCE to become an over-arching system with more structure and permanence; and they wanted it to take a larger role in addressing the challenges of the time.

At its Paris Summit in 1990, the CSCE established its first permanent institutions: a secretariat, first located in Prague; a conflict prevention centre in Vienna; and an office for free elections in Warsaw. The Paris Summit also established a cycle of political consultations: meetings of heads of state and government to be held every two years; meetings of foreign ministers (the Council) to be held between summits; and more frequent meetings of government officials. The Paris Summit also endorsed the establishment of the CSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

The Helsinki Summit of 1992 continued this process, creating the position of High Commissioner on National Minorities. The Helsinki Summit not only strengthened CSCE institutions and structures, but set up frameworks for dispute settlement, fact-finding and peacekeeping missions, and mediation or conciliation missions.

The last summit, held in Budapest in December 1994, further cemented the position of the CSCE in European security — in addition to changing its name to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Thus the CSCE became the OSCE. Conflict prevention, preventive diplomacy and crisis management remain the OSCE's most important responsibilities.