

The Helsinki process is further characterized by the fact that the CSCE is the only European forum where all the states of Europe, the USA, and Canada periodically convene for consultations on almost all important issues of their mutual relations. The CSCE constituted an important East-West forum for discussions and contacts. In practice, the neutral and non-aligned states have played an important role at most CSCE meetings by their efforts to build bridges between East and West. The bloc-to-bloc character of the CSCE was reflected until recently in the fact that the different groups of CSCE states often acted as groups at CSCE meetings.

A series of revolutionary events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union led to an eventual restructuring of the CSCE process. These events were initiated by the rather fundamental changes which took place in the Soviet Union after the change in the Soviet leadership in 1985 with the appointment of Mikhail Gorbachev as Secretary General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The new party chief initiated new policies of glasnost, perestroika and new thinking in the Soviet Union which also had far-reaching effects on the international relations of the USSR. In relation to a great number of issues, which had sharply divided East and West for a long time, the Soviet position gradually became more flexible, resulting in an increasing improvement in East-West relations. These new developments had a positive effect on the course of negotiations at the Vienna Follow-up Meeting of 1986.

More far-reaching changes came in the fall of 1989 when one East European Communist government collapsed after another, making possible the unification of Germany and seriously changing the military and political relationship between East and West.

During the Paris Summit of 1990 the CSCE process was institutionalized into a more formal organization. Under the provisions of the Paris Charter, the Heads of State of all CSCE nations shall now meet on the occasion of all follow-up meetings. These Follow-up Meetings will be held, as a rule, every two years to allow the participating states to take stock of developments, review the implementation of their commitments and consider further steps in the CSCE process. In addition, their Ministers of Foreign Affairs shall meet as a Council regularly and at least once a year. These meetings will provide the central forum for political consultation within the CSCE process. The Council will consider issues relevant to the CSCE and take appropriate decisions. Within the Council will be a Committee of Senior Officials who will prepare the meetings of the Council and carry out its decisions.⁶

⁶ The Charter of Paris For A New Europe. pg. 21.