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When my Prime Minister suggested some years ago that Slovenia should take on the Chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 2005, I knew it would be a challenge for my country.

Our 55 states face critical security issues that require our full attention, from terrorism and human trafficking to frozen conflicts in Georgia, Moldova and Nagorno-Karabakh. The OSCE, a pan-European body spawned by the 1975 Helsinki Final Act of which the United States is an active member, is uniquely placed to address these challenges.

I did not imagine that I would spend my first few months haggling with fellow foreign ministers about a relatively insignificant amount of money. Yet that is exactly what I have been doing. The OSCE faces paralysis within a matter of months because we have been unable to agree on a 2005 budget or on how much each country should contribute in future.

The sums involved are relatively small – the OSCE budget was 180 million euros last year, about four percent of the annual budget of the District of Columbia. Working on provisional budget arrangements, the OSCE is unable to launch any new activities or implement important initiatives agreed by our own governments. This is both absurd and embarrassing.

The budget dispute, of course, masks fundamental political differences which go well beyond the OSCE. The Russian Federation and some CIS countries argue that the OSCE applies double standards, that the way it monitors elections is flawed, that too much attention is paid to human rights and not enough to security. The organization is losing its relevance, they say.

The United States and the European Union, on the other hand, appear broadly content with the focus on the “human dimension.” They rarely bring significant political-military issues to the negotiating table.

I sense a hardening of attitudes on all sides and I hear rhetoric uncomfortably reminiscent of the Cold War. If the impasse continues, not just the Organization’s credibility but its very survival will be in jeopardy. Does that matter? I firmly believe it does.

The OSCE started life in the 1970s as a series of conferences known as the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). Born at a time of deep distrust between two opposing blocs, each of which had the power to obliterate the other, it provided a forum in which trust was slowly and painfully built up.

Setbacks and crises were common, but the result was a series of landmark accords, starting in Helsinki, on confidence-building measures to reduce the risk of war and on new standards for human rights and democratic elections. Without doubt, the Helsinki process played a significant role in helping to bring about a peaceful end to the Cold War.

After the collapse of Communism, our leaders reinvented the Organization as an operational body with a network of field offices. Throughout the 1990s, it played an important conflict prevention role from the Crimea to the South Caucasus and helped with post-conflict rehabilitation in places as diverse as Kosovo, Tajikistan and Georgia.

The OSCE has achieved much on a shoestring budget. As the only security organization which includes the United States, Canada, Russia, the whole of Europe and the former Soviet Union as equal partners, it could achieve so much more if participating States mustered the political will to let it do its job properly.

Transition countries are crying out for the expertise the OSCE can provide in training efficient, democratically accountable police forces. All countries want to boost their capacity to fight terrorism and the OSCE helps by bringing together experts in protecting airports from shoulder-fired missiles and making passports more difficult for terrorists to forge. All of us confront the scourges of human trafficking, organized crime and racial and religious intolerance.

Yet many OSCE countries appear to contemplate the Organization's growing loss of influence with indifference. Our heads of state have not held a summit meeting since 1999.

I am reminded of a marriage which is fundamentally sound but which has grown stale because the partners take each other for granted and lack the imagination to foresee the damaging consequences of splitting up.

So what can be done?

First, Russia should stop blocking the budget and engage constructively in trying to move the OSCE more in the direction it wants - by negotiation with its partners. It should play a more active role in the work of the OSCE by sending more Russians to field missions, providing more election observers and submitting more high-calibre candidates for top positions.

Second, the United States and the European Union should take Russian concerns seriously. They should avoid patronising their partners and acknowledge that not all western countries are perfect democracies with flawless human rights records. They should devote more attention to the political-military dimension of security, without in any way weakening OSCE human rights commitments, and stop treating the OSCE as if it was little more than an NGO.

Third, all OSCE countries should devote high-level political attention to the Organization and use it as the effective security instrument it was designed to be. Lip-service is no longer enough.

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