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THE HELSINKI PROCESS: BRIDGING THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

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THE HELSINKI PROCESS: BRIDGING THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

Alfred Sant

Going back in time to the changes brought about in world politics by the CSCE conference – the so-called Helsinki and Geneva processes – is a journey to another country. They did things differently then. If we wish to understand what happened and how it really affected the world in which we live now, we need to understand that other country. Helsinki bridges a huge divide between now and then. To assess it, one needs to constantly practice a dialectic between the past and the present, indeed between the past and the future.

For us in Malta, the Helsinki process is marked by the huge efforts of the Maltese Labour government forty years ago to inject a Mediterranean perspective into the mulilateral negotiations that sought to introduce a new framework for security and cooperation in Europe. Since final conference decisions depended on unanimity, Malta could with its veto, halt the overall process -- which is what the then government did. In the end, the issue became a cliff hanger, paralleling the ways by which in 1971, the Malta-UK military rent agreements had been negotiated. Ultimately, Malta obtained the reference to Mediterranean security that it required, although very little important follow-up occurred on the matter in later years.

However, the main significance of the Helsinki process as a game changer, both when it was being negotiated and in the aftermath, lies elsewhere. Yet not so long after the Helsinki process was launched – with the establishment of the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe among other initiatives -- new contingencies emerged which rendered the premises on which it had been established ambiguous, to say the least. The problem came to a head with the fall of the Berlin Wall, German reunification and the collapse of the USSR. Over the years, the ambiguities have deepened, even turned into contradictions given the European and world scenarios in which we find ourselves.

In what follows, I would like to explore these ambiguities and contradictions.

As I do this, I cannot but remember what my training as a diplomat in the late sixties had led me to believe. It confirmed my prior instinctive attachment to the principle -- let me call it the Gaullist principle -- of the nation state. In those days you could approach it from the left or the right of the ideological spectrum.

The nation state was to be considered as a supreme construct. Within its confines, there could be no interference from the outside by other nation states except as a breach of international law or as an exercise of war.

True, the establishment of the United Nations post the Second World War had re-established the concept of a worldwide congress of nations, which could under certain rules that reflected the balance of power at the time the UN was constituted, promote collective action to counteract the initiatives, internal or external, of any state deemed to be violating the principles of the UN charter as agreed by all. However the procedures to fulfil this were so conditioned by countervailing approval from leading players in the global international system that they were rendered inoperative as legal and diplomatic levers with which to intervene in the internal processes of other states.

True too that the establishment of the Council of Europe, with a supranational court set up to deliver binding judgements on human rights cases in sovereign member states, conditioned the latter's sovereignty over their internal matters to the decisions of an "outside" court. This too it could be argued was a breach of the “Gaullist” principle that sovereignty precluded all outside legitimate interference in national affairs. To be sure, in post-independence African countries France under de Gaulle was the first to breach that principle by in practice, organizing systemic interference in their affairs. But the subterfuges it resorted to in doing this, at least meant that lip service was still paid to the principle – which indeed had stood up well to the challenge of how European colonies in Africa and Asia were dismantled in the aftermath of the Second World War, up to the late sixties of the previous century.

By this time though, the overriding reality in world diplomacy was the permanent standoff between what seemed to be equally powerful antagonistic superpowers in a balance that could easily be ruptured.

Their biggest source of tension remained Europe itself, split down the middle between the West – NATO basically with a subset forming the European Common Market which was slowly setting up shop – and the East, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics – USSR – with its satellites consisting of Eastern European nations that formed the Warsaw Pact on the military front, and COMECON, a trade exchange pact on the economic front. The Common Market played according to free enterprise rules, suitably adapted, COMECON according to state to state planning and trading arrangements.

The real confrontation was military, with both sides groping to find a method by which to create rules that would limit the threats of nuclear brinkmanship and war. They arose from the standoff in central Europe, as well as from the need to stay ahead of the opposing side by developing new engines of nuclear destruction. In this game, there was always the possibility that uncontrollable crises would emerge.

On the West, the perceived danger was that unforeseen developments would trigger nuclear war. On the East, the fear was that the West would seek to permanently destabilize the Soviet system.

The classic example of what could happen in such circumstances was the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, when a nuclear Armageddon seemed close. The USSR shipped warheads to Cuba allegedly in retaliation for the deployment of US missiles to the Turkish border closest to the USSR. In the long aftermath of that crisis, the idea germinated that the superpowers were effectively playing a zero sum game. It would be much better for both if the rules of the game were defined in such a way that confrontation could be held within well defined limits and defused. Slowly under the Kissinger stewardship of US foreign affairs, this way of thinking led to the launch of two longstanding diplomatic initiatives that had global significance.

One consisted of direct negotiations between the superpowers to achieve nuclear disarmament. The other was the multilateral conference between all states in Europe to agree on a diplomatic architecture of non-belligerence and cooperation between them that would prevent and defuse conflicts between them.

The tit for tat aimed for in the nuclear talks was obvious, if complicated.

In the Helsinki and Geneva processes, what made the anticipated payoffs so desirable to the Superpowers was less evident. However, already in the US, not least because of the Vietnam War, another bout of fatigue with world commitments had set in. If instabilities in Europe could be minimised without ceding strategic ground or losing face, it would all be to the good. For the USSR, an explicit rather than a de facto recognition from the West regarding the status quo in the “East” appeared to be a good bargain. It needed to be set durably and in full recognition of the geostrategic space occupied by the USSR in European affairs, following the Second World War.

A deal in this context was made extremely complex by the realization that it could not take the form of an agreement between Superpowers. It had to be shaped and endorsed by all European nation states. So it was agreed that any deal would require the unanimous acceptance of all European countries, plus Canada and the US. in addition to matters covering diplomatic, political and economic agendas, as is usual in classic agreements between nation states, cultural, social and human rights issues were also tabled for negotiation.

Perhaps it was inevitable that this would happen given that the nation states of the West had developed overlapping ways of promoting their cooperation to include such issues. They could not reasonably be expected to bracket them away in any pan-European agreement planned to encourage greater cooperation on the continent. There was resistance to this from the “East”. Eventually human rights, cultural and related issues were bundled into a negotiating “basket” (as it was called) created specially for them. It was not one of the easiest areas of discussion.

The Helsinki process developed into a labyrinthine negotiation involving long months of detailed give and take that occupied armies of diplomats fulltime. I well remember the day when in Helsinki, then Malta’s roving ambassador the late Joe Attard Kingswell, with myself tagging along as his assistant, visited Mr Evarist Saliba Malta’s sole diplomat at the Helsinki negotiations. From his briefings, one could understand he had a very difficult job to keep following the progress or lack of it in discussions on the various baskets, while keeping an eye on where and how Malta’s vital interest could be affected by developments. This was well before the final showdown in the plenary conference.

In the event, the complex confidence building measures that ring fenced future military manoeuvres under the Helsinki and Geneva agreements proved quite useful to stabilize the threats of armed warfare arising in Western and Eastern Europe. They ensured that difficult situations on the ground could be contained by all sides within manageable and diplomatically transparent procedures. Actually, the general adoption of non belligerent policies by the main actors would serve to ensure maintenance of the military status quo.

However in a fundamental way, Helsinki achieved two significant breakthroughs in European diplomacy that at a second or third stage, contributed greatly to radical changes in the existing status quo. The basket which grouped human, democratic and cultural rights as part of the subject matter covered by diplomatic discourse in Europe established ground breaking principles in relations between participating member states. Secondly, by virtue of the very design of Helsinki, the USSR was acknowledged to legitimately have a zone of influence in European space.

The first constituted a total breach of the principle, which we have already discussed, that states did not intervene in the national affairs of each other. Now, intervention under certain conditions and within certain limits as defined by Helsinki could be allowable and relevant when grievances came up related to soft areas of policy like the human and cultural rights of citizens, topics that are politically very delicate. No doubt even as the Soviets resisted the idea and when they eventually came round to letting it stay on the negotiating table, they believed the issue could be managed.

It turned out that they were wrong, at least in so far as developments within their bloc was concerned. The establishment of a diplomatic framework agreed *erga omnes* within which Western styled human and political rights standards became a common reference point served as a trigger for an unstoppable change within the Soviet system itself that eventually led to its implosion.

Obviously there were other factors besides the Helsinki process (and the completion of a first phase of nuclear disarmament between the Superpowers) that contributed to the collapse of the Soviet system.

There was the emergence under the US Reagan administration of an outright challenge within Helsinki and nuclear disarmament parameters, to a competition over the development of new high technology war tools that bled the Soviet financial system white, at a time when its economic performance became increasingly mediocre.

There was the rise of outstanding personalities in Poland – Lech Walesa and Pope John Paul XXIII but also others – who knew how to play the game launched under the Helsinki process of making human and other "soft" rights a salient diplomatic issue in Europe, under the "new" security and cooperation order laid out for the continent.

There was the spreading importance of more invasive and efficient means of communication that made the interpenetration of ideas and ideals between nations faster and easier.

Yet all these would probably have been much less effective had there not been the Helsinki framework which made their impact apparently less explosive apparently but in fact more insidious. Military action in Poland on the lines successfully – if that is the right word – implemented by the Soviets to crush the Hungarian uprising in the fifties and the Czech strike for greater liberty in economic management and civil liberties, had become much more difficult if not next to impossible.

Eventually, efforts to unbutton civil and economic constraints on society rolled through the Soviet Union itself. They resonated within the Gorbachev administration, leading to the development of the theses of perestroika... restructuring ... and glasnost... They went on to provoke Poland type reactions in COMECON countries and a final meltdown of the Soviet system.

The legal and diplomatic groundwork for these developments was clearly laid during the CSCE process, though the outcome exceeded by far what the most optimistic Western planners of the time must have targeted for.

Indeed, the same legal and diplomatic groundwork also unintentionally accounted for the development of what became in the aftermath of Helsinki, the newest product by which states or conglomerates of states gained influence over other diplomatic entities: soft power. This can be defined as the presentation by a nation state of a profile for conduct and standards regarding cultural, social and human rights that becomes so attractive that it generates support in its favour among the members of that state's very competitors.

Again, the main beneficiary of this Helsinki opening, was a Western construct, the European Union. Its soft power helped enormously to make the breakdown of the Soviet system manageable, by buffering what could have been explosive situations and keeping them under control. And it followed all the time the mechanisms laid out in the Helsinki process, which had not foreseen scenarios such as those that followed the fall of the Berlin wall. Under the aegis of the Helsinki process, the rise of the EU's soft power came on line at the same time that technological changes in the field of communications enabled its manifestations to elude state surveillance and controls by reaching directly the civil society, indeed the citizens, of other actors. As the still ongoing digital revolution surged forward, this facilitation became so effective, that while the diplomatic structures of the Helsinki process lost traction, the EU's soft power effectively became close to hegemonic in Europe.

However there is another legacy of the Helsinki process that needs to be kept in mind. After all, Soviet participation in the Conference was not totally determined by overstretch. What was also achieved diplomatically at Helsinki was the definition of a recognised and legitimised space within Europe where the USSR could exercise its influence as a “great” European power. And from now on, I will need to use the terms USSR and Russia interchangeably for obvious reasons.

Russia had always been a problem for Europe due to its size, its potential, its character astraddle over three continental masses. Did it really form part of the concert of European nations and if so to what extent? It rarely formed part of the balancing games, military and diplomatic, that for centuries defined relations between European powers, except when recourse was had – with success or insuccess -- to Russia’s vast human resources at moments of catastrophic conflict, such as during World Wars I and II. Yet right through, recognition of Russia’s position in Europe was fragile, reluctant, unstable.

On this basis, one could argue that the Helsinki process provided the first significant diplomatic occasion which implemented via negotiations involving all concerned, procedures that enshrined Russian or Soviet engagement in Europe in most meaningful dimensions. The presence of Russia in the European space was given full recognition as a significant and relevant reality and the Russia's part in that space was defined. Indeed it could be argued that this was the first time ever that Russia/the USSR was provided with such recognition.

Then the collapse of the Soviet Union did not bring new warfare in its wake. The structures of the Helsinki process were important initially to absorb the shocks of that major event. But as the dust settled a bit, the soft power of the European Union drew towards it the national entities that emerged from the former Soviet sphere of influence, and it did so smoothly, with minimal outer conflict and antagonisms, also due to Helsinki. Obviously another reason for this was that during the same period, the new Russia was really passing through very hard economic times and was hardly in a position to sustain its interests.

At the end of this process however, Russia had lost the geo-strategic space it gained under the Helsinki process. Meanwhile, the structures born of that latter process weakened and had lost much of their potential to monitor the political disequilibria being caused by the EU's expansion. This proceeded undeterred even as the Russian economy began to improve and a new administration headed by Vladimir Putin began progressively to assert the claims of Russian nationalism.

Which is what accounts for the current stalemate mired in long distance conflict between Russia and practically the rest of Europe, over the Ukraine and other former territories that belonged to the USSR. Denial of the European space that was granted to Russia under the Helsinki process, even if adapted to the changing circumstances, has relegated that country to the status of an outsider looking in, which is not in its interests, nor presumably those of Europe.

So it has reacted not by using the tools of soft power, where it was hopelessly outgunned, but by the methods of hard power in areas still not covered by the NATO blanket. And here, the rest of Europe has been stymied by the mismatch between its soft power capabilities and the hard power responses of the Russians. Issues of security and cooperation in Europe once again have gone to the top of the agenda. But they are hardly of a nature that fit the models envisaged under the Helsinki/Geneva agreements.

The situation is extremely dangerous, even if for the present it is overshadowed by the Greek crisis, another area incidentally where the EU's soft power has met a huge reverse.

To sum up, the conclusion is as follows: the structures set up by the Helsinki process were extremely valuable to protect Europe's security in the period leading up to the Soviet collapse and for some years after that. Since then, as tools by which to manage security and cooperation issues in Europe, they have become out of skew with the new realities. (In all the above, I am putting a bracket around the Balkan conflicts which triggered harsh atrocities and where the failure and impotence of Helsinki process structures reflected sub-regional tensions rather than pan-European strategic considerations.)

So what do we learn from a trip to the past of the CSCE as a foreign country from the seventies of the previous century? I think this:

Security and cooperation between European member states requires new thinking and new structures. The spirit of 1975 needs to be revived, in a new updated mode, with among others the following goals: to take into account the interdependence and interpenetration between European states and the outside world, that has increased exponentially over the years; to define the bounds, if any, of soft power inside the European perimeter; to agree on the space in Europe that should be recognised to Russia as an integral part of the European concert of nations.