

From Confidence-Building Measures to Arms Control and Disarmament in the Helsinki Process:

Lessons and Implications for Asia's Future

Hirofumi KOSAKA

Lecturer, Nagoya City University

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電話： 03-5452-5462
Web サイト： <https://roles.rcast.u-tokyo.ac.jp/>

Introduction

The Helsinki Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), signed by 35 states in 1975, turned 50. Its signature and the subsequent developments, known as the Helsinki Process, have been widely regarded as one of the most prominent achievements in the Cold War. While the ongoing war in Ukraine is shaking the principles of the Helsinki Final Act, its indispensable role in the years leading up to the end of the Cold War remains unchanged, and it also contains valuable lessons for Asia.

The Helsinki Process has a comprehensive structure, composed of three dimensions: (1) politico-military dimension, where confidence-building measures are discussed, (2) economic dimension, where East-West economic relations are discussed, and (3) human dimension, where human rights and human contacts are discussed. Among the three dimensions, a number of studies focus on the “human dimension” of the Helsinki Process. The most notable contributions by Daniel Thomas (Thomas, 2003) and Sarah Snyder (Snyder, 2011) suggest that human rights provisions in the Helsinki Final Act helped to transcend the Cold War in Europe.

There is no doubt that the achievements in the human dimension of the Helsinki Process, also known as the “Helsinki Effect”, helped to transcend the Cold War by weakening authoritarian rule in Eastern Europe. Yet, the politico-military dimension of the process deserves equal attention. Especially, significant achievements of the confidence-building measures deserve deeper appreciation. However, studies on confidence-building measures have been relatively overlooked by Cold War historians with a few exceptions. This is surprising, as the confidence-building measures agreed in the final years of the Cold War were pointed out as an important event at the time, with some even arguing it as “being a truly transitional negotiation, the primary process that signalled the end of the Cold War for most Europeans” at the time (Macintosh, 1993, p. 935).

This paper overviews the evolution of the confidence-building measures, from their modest beginnings in the Helsinki Final Act, to a full-fledged European security architecture in the post-Cold War Europe, which consists of three pillars – Vienna Document on confidence-building measures, Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, and Treaty on Open Skies (For timeline and structure, see Figure 1). It points out that the continued discussion of confidence-building measures and their development contributed to the transformation of international relations in Europe. Special emphasis will be placed on the cooperation aspect of the Helsinki Process, rather

than the confrontational aspect, including human rights issues. Furthermore, it also examines the implications for the Asian future. For clarifying purposes, this paper will solely use the terminology “confidence-building measures” (CBMs), while the word “confidence and security-building measures” (CSBMs) has been used in the realm of CSCE and its successor OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) since the beginning of the 1980s.

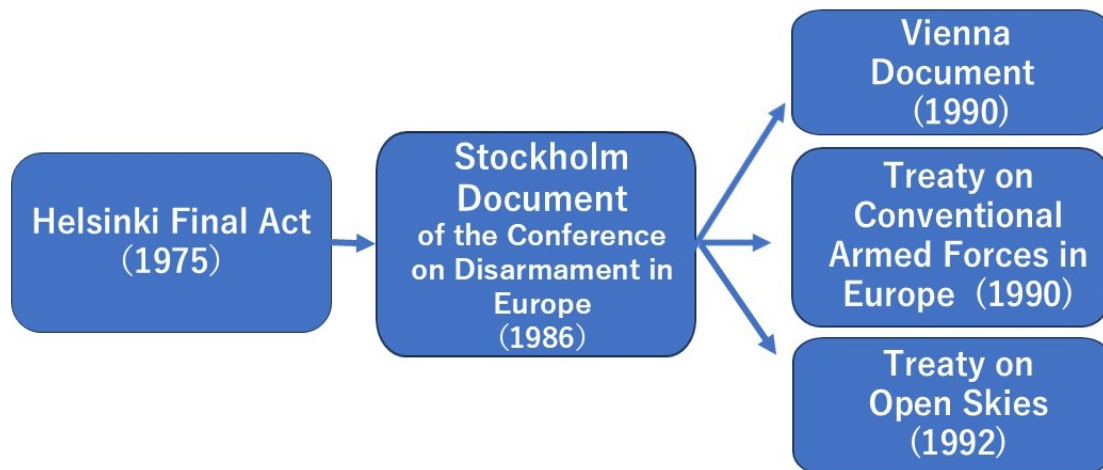


Figure 1: The evolution of European security architecture

Early Development of Confidence-Building Measures

The concept of present age confidence-building measures can be traced back to the 1950s. After the death of Stalin in 1953, the thaw between the East and the West gradually emerged, creating a favourable environment for a dialogue. Under such a situation, actions taken by both the East and the West created room for confidence-building measures.

As for the West, one of the signature proposals was “the Open Skies”, initiated by President Dwight D. Eisenhower of the US. In 1955, at the Geneva Summit by the Big Four, the president proposed mutual aerial surveillance. The proposal was further pursued at succeeding meetings at the United Nations. Although its character was conceived as a verification measure intended to contribute to future disarmament (Dunay and Spitzer, 2004, p. 17) – one has to keep in mind that the proposals were made before the introduction of intelligence satellites, which are now a major means of verification – it certainly included confidence-building aspects. In fact, the term “confidence-building measures” itself was first used on this occasion. Although historians are divided as to Eisenhower’s motives (Jones, 2014, p. 9), the proposal nevertheless set the Western position on arms control and confidence-building.

As for the East, an important initiative was taken by the Polish foreign minister, Adam Rapacki. In 1957, he presented a so-called “Rapacki Plan”, which was elaborated further in the following months. The plan was to establish a denuclearised zone in Central Europe, including Czechoslovakia, two Germanies, and Poland. The provisions certainly included “a system of extensive and effective control” such as control posts for the implementation of provisions, but it was inclined towards legal restraints on weapons. Indeed, many of the essential principles and features of subsequent successfully established regional Nuclear-weapon-free zones treaties are to be found in the Rapacki Plan (Hamel-Green, 2011, p. 4).

While the comprehensive list of initiatives and discussions taken during the period of “Geneva Spirit” is out of scope for this paper, the tendency of both blocs has emerged. The West advocated measures to enhance military transparency, while the East sought to introduce legal or political restraints, including declarations. This Soviet “political-declaratory approach” versus the Western “military-technical approach” (Lachowski and Rotfeld, 2002) will reappear in the succeeding arms control negotiations for decades to come, with resembled ideas and proposals submitted from both sides.

At the time, however, the progress was limited. Neither the Open Skies nor the Rapacki Plan were agreed upon. The 1958 Surprise Attack Conference in Geneva, attended by experts of five NATO countries and five Warsaw Pact countries, was similarly unsuccessful, due to divergent views. Nevertheless, a small step was achieved in the first half of the 1960s. After the Cuban Missile Crisis, limited bilateral confidence-building measures, as exemplified by the Hotline – a direct communications link between the heads of state – were introduced. The Hotline between Washington and Moscow became operational in 1963, followed by the one between Paris and Moscow in 1966, and between London and Moscow in 1967. Still, multilateral confidence-building measures were yet to be agreed upon, lagging behind bilateral measures. In the background, détente proceeded bilaterally rather than multilaterally in the 1960s, with one of the main reasons being the recognition problem of East Germany – multilateral détente naturally entailed the participation (and thus de facto recognition) of East Germany, which was irreconcilable with Bonn’s Hallstein Doctrine.

Confidence-Building Measures in the Helsinki Final Act

As the decade turned into the 1970s, the success of Ostpolitik by the Willy Brandt government of West Germany opened up a path for multilateral détente in Europe. It was such a situation that the

dynamics for holding a CSCE gained momentum. During the preparatory phase of the Conference, the discussion of multilateral confidence-building measures was allocated to Basket 1. At the same time, conventional arms control was now to proceed in a different forum, the Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions (MBFR) talks in Vienna. Hence, the evolution of the confidence-building measures in the CSCE, now detached from conventional disarmament, was destined to be gradual and modest.

On August 1, 1975, the Helsinki Final Act was signed after years of preparations and negotiations. The very first multilateral confidence-building measures were now introduced as an integral part of the Helsinki Process. As for the contents, the following measures were included: (1) prior notification of major military manoeuvres, (2) prior notification of other military manoeuvres, (3) exchange of observers, (4) prior notification of major military movements. These measures were to be called “First Generation of Confidence-Building Measures”.

These measures were designed to reduce the danger of accidental war, to prevent surprise attacks, as well as to increase the threshold of coercion by force. The prior notification of military manoeuvres contributes to enhancing transparency, which may contribute to preventing the outbreak of war through misunderstanding. The necessity of advanced notification is also of use to prevent the concealing of surprise attacks. As demonstrated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, military manoeuvres could be used as cover-ups of military aggression. Therefore, prior notification of such manoeuvres can make such malign intentions more difficult. Furthermore, notification could also raise the threshold for coercive shows of force against other Warsaw Pact states, as was envisaged under the Brezhnev Doctrine. Because prior notification was required, immediate shows of force by Moscow against other Warsaw Pact countries would become more difficult, thereby contributing to stability in Europe. It has even been pointed out that the measures introduced were primarily designed to inhibit the political exploitation of military force (Holst, 1983, p. 3). In any case, confidence-building measures were expected to contribute to security in Europe.

The introduction of confidence-building measures by the Final Act had both significance and limits. As for the significance, the following three points are worth mentioning. First, it introduced multilateral confidence-building measures for the first time in international politics. This itself was a huge progress. Second, it initiated the institutionalisation of security cooperation in Europe, which led to the current OSCE. Third, all countries converged and agreed on the idea of avoidance of war

and risk reduction. In the Helsinki Final Act, there are various rules which contradict, at times. For example, the principle of territorial integrity and right to self-determination, or respect for human rights and non-intervention in internal affairs (all of them are included in the ten principles in Basket 1), are difficult to reconcile in some circumstances. In successive review meetings of the CSCE (such as the one in Belgrade 1977-78 and Madrid 1980-83), the latter became one of the contentious points. In contrast, as for the confidence-building measures, countries converged and agreed on the necessity of avoiding war. This became important for the continuation of the Helsinki process in the coming years.

At the same time, there were limits. First and foremost, all but one measure, which is prior notification of major military manoeuvres over 25,000 troops, was voluntary. This hampered the effectiveness of the whole confidence-building regime. Additionally, the only mandatory measure, the prior notification of major military manoeuvres, was also limited in scope. As for countries whose territory extends beyond Europe (e.g. Soviet Union, Turkey), prior notification need be given only of manoeuvres which take place in an area within 250 kilometres of their European border. This meant that the vast territory of Siberia was out of scope. Hence, the sense of necessity to upgrade the confidence-building measures was soon shared among the participants.

Initiative for Enhancement: Conference on Disarmament in Europe

In such a situation, France took the initiative, which had a profound and long-lasting impact on the Helsinki Process. In January 1978, France proposed the convening of a “Conference on Disarmament in Europe” (CDE). The plan was also explained at the United Nations Special Session on Disarmament in May by the French president, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. There were three main elements in the proposal: (1) convene a two-stage conference to discuss security issues in Europe, with the first stage dedicated to the discussion of confidence-building measures and the second stage for conventional disarmament, (2) participants will be 35 signatories of the Helsinki Final Act, (3) measures will cover the whole of Europe, “from the Atlantic to the Urals”. The aim of France was to create a favourable international climate, against the backdrop of declining détente in the late 1970s.

So, how did the other countries respond to the proposal? As for the Western countries, they prioritised the discussion of verifiable and militarily significant confidence-building measures, applicable to the whole of Europe. This was not far from the original French idea, but without the

element of conventional disarmament. As for the Eastern countries, they sought the discussion of legal restraints, such as no-first-use of nuclear weapons or no-use-of-force. Therefore, the respective positions of both blocs since the 1950s resurfaced, which reflected the threat perceptions of both sides. Nonetheless, thanks to the key role played by France and its partners of the European Communities (Romano, 2017), the discussion went ahead. By the end of 1979, despite differences, all countries converged on the necessity of holding a Conference on Disarmament in Europe to discuss the upgrade of confidence-building measures (the Eastern side was initially calling it with a different name: Conference on Military Détente and Disarmament in Europe).

The motivation for enhancing confidence-building measures in the realm of CSCE endured the challenging international environment in the early 1980s, which is called the “Second Cold War”. As the new decade began, the East-West relations deteriorated sharply: Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, the Reagan Administration’s hardline policy towards Moscow, and the implementation of Martial Law in Poland in response to Solidarność, just to name a few, all contributed to heightened tensions. Nevertheless, the negotiation of the mandate, or the terms and conditions, of the Conference on Disarmament in Europe proceeded among the CSCE states. It was the discussion of such topics that kept the CSCE afloat. When the Helsinki Process was on the verge of collapse after the Polish Martial Law in December 1981, the expectation of the agreement on the Conference on Disarmament in Europe contributed to the continuation of the ongoing CSCE Madrid Review Meeting (1980-1983). This was because all CSCE countries agreed on the idea to introduce a mechanism which reduced the risk of military conflict, even if their views and interpretations of the Helsinki Final Act differed sharply on human rights.

In September 1983, the mandate of the Conference on Disarmament in Europe was agreed upon as part of the concluding document of the CSCE Madrid Review Meeting. Three main elements of the mandate were: (1) the first stage of the Conference, the negotiation of confidence-building measures, to start in 1984 in Stockholm, (2) participants are 35 states of the CSCE, (3) the measures discussed will be military significant, politically binding, verifiable, and cover the whole of Europe up to the Urals (the official name was now “Conference on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures and Disarmament in Europe”, but this paper uses the shorter name “Conference on Disarmament in Europe”, which was more commonly used at the time). Therefore, the original French idea of the Conference proposed six years earlier, in 1978, was largely accepted.

Against all the odds, with the newest challenge posed by the Soviet shootdown of Korean Airlines 007 days before, the Conference on Disarmament in Europe was finally set to sail. This episode demonstrated the strength of confidence-building aspects of the Helsinki Process.

In January 1984, the Conference on Disarmament in Europe opened as the sole functioning East-West security dialogue, with ministerial attendance. Both the US and the Soviet Union also sent their foreign ministers to the opening ceremony, thanks to the efforts of European countries. This was a significant event: no other meeting within the CSCE framework (or the Helsinki Process) received such a high-level attendance since 1975. What is striking is that this took place at the height of international tension, when all other East–West arms control talks were suspended. By the end of 1983, all arms control talks had come to a halt due to NATO’s deployment of intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe. Hence, the Conference on Disarmament in Europe was the only functioning arms dialogue between the East and the West, providing a valuable channel for communication. In other words, the politico-military dimension of the Helsinki Process contributed to the de-escalation of an international crisis (Kosaka, 2025). The Soviet Ambassador to the US, Anatoly Dobrynin, mentioned in his memoirs that at the US-Soviet ministerial meeting held on the margins of the conference in Stockholm, “both were trying to find their way out of the dangerous impasse which they recognized we had reached. That introduced a certain element of optimism into the otherwise gloomy picture” (Dobrynin, 1995, p. 544). This episode shows how much the once-modest confidence-building aspect of CSCE had achieved in international politics.

Once the Conference on Disarmament in Europe was launched, the all-too-familiar issues reemerged in the negotiations. The Western countries aimed to enhance confidence-building measures by strengthening transparency. They argued for the introduction of on-site inspection as a means of verification. The Eastern countries, on the other hand, advocated a treaty on non-use of force. Therefore, the rivalry between “political-declaratory approach” and “military-technical approach” once again came to the fore. However, through compromise, the negotiation gradually progressed ahead of other arms control talks, including nuclear arms talks. The rapprochement between the superpowers, aided by Gorbachev’s rise to power in March 1985, also facilitated progress. When Reagan and Gorbachev met in Geneva for the first time in November 1985, the Conference on Disarmament in Europe was the only arms control negotiation where “progress was noted” in the statement. Negotiation of confidence-building measures became the forerunner in arms control negotiations.

The Stockholm Document (1986) and the Transformation of the European Security Landscape

In September 1986, after almost three years of negotiations, the Conference on Disarmament in Europe adopted the “Stockholm Document” and concluded successfully. The agreed document included the following measures: (1) prior notification of military activities, (2) invitation of observers, (3) exchange of annual schedules of military activities before the beginning of each year, (4) verification (including on-site inspection). Of these, the first two had already been included in the Helsinki Final Act, but the measures became much more stringent. The latter two were newly introduced by the Stockholm Document. These measures came to be known as “Second Generation of Confidence-Building Measures”, as they were qualitatively different from those introduced by the Helsinki Final Act.

The agreement at Stockholm had wider significance and a lasting legacy in international politics in three respects. First, it made a breakthrough in arms control and disarmament. Not only was it the first arms control agreement achieved since the 1970s, but it also introduced on-site inspections in such agreements for the first time. For decades, the Soviet Union was opposed to such measures, regarding them as espionage, which also complicated the negotiation of the Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT) years earlier. Hence, Moscow’s acceptance of on-site inspections at the Conference on Disarmament in Europe was a groundbreaking event, which completely changed the landscape of arms control and disarmament. Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze described this as a moment in which “a historical threshold was crossed” (Shevardnadze, 1991, p. 91) in his memoirs. The agreement reached at Stockholm paved the way for subsequent agreements with on-site inspections, such as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty), Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I), Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty) and Chemical Weapons Convention.

Second, the agreement transformed the nature and scope of confidence-building measures. While the implementation of such measures in the Helsinki Final Act had been mostly dependent on the goodwill of participating states, it became mandatory. This shift from voluntary to obligatory measures substantially raised the level of predictability and transparency of military activities, contributing to stability in Europe. Moreover, the scope of confidence-building measures was now extended to the whole of Europe, from the Atlantic to the Urals. This meant that the Soviet Union would now need to disclose its military information that is relevant to the European continent, which

further enhanced transparency. This geographical scope of the measures realised Charles de Gaulle's earlier vision of an undivided Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals, for the first time.

Third, the agreement laid the structural foundations for the post-Cold War European security structure, which consisted of three pillars: the Vienna Document, the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, and the Treaty on Open Skies¹. The Vienna Document, agreed in 1990 with subsequent amendments, became the direct successor of the Stockholm Document and further strengthened confidence-building measures in Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals. The Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, signed in 1990, stipulated conventional disarmament for the whole of Europe, also from the Atlantic to the Urals. The treaty was negotiated under the framework of CSCE, although the participants were limited to countries from two military blocs. In this sense, the treaty derives its origins from both MBFR (which did not yield results after 16 years of negotiations) and CSCE (including Conference on Disarmament in Europe), but with its character distinctly tilted towards the latter, resembling the original French idea in the 1970s. This shows how the gradual development of confidence-building measures in the Helsinki Process finally led to substantial disarmament. Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe was often referred to as “the cornerstone of European Security”, contributing to the reduction of vast armaments that once dominated the European landscape. The Treaty on Open Skies, signed in 1992, permitted surveillance flights by the state parties for building confidence. The area covered was from Vancouver to Vladivostok, which further widened the existing framework “from the Atlantic to the Urals”, and complemented the aforementioned mechanisms. These three pillars have been crucial in transforming the European security architecture, although they gradually lost their relevance since the late 2000s².

In addition to opening a path to the post-Cold War European security structures, the agreement at Stockholm demonstrated the value of the CSCE as a permanent forum for dialogue in Europe, facilitating its institutionalisation. In the longer perspective, it helped generate the momentum that resulted in the establishment of the Forum for Security Co-operation (FSC) in 1992, and the transformation of the CSCE into the OSCE in 1995. In a nutshell, the agreement at the Conference on Disarmament in Europe was a catalyst for the transformation of the European security landscape.

Lessons from Europe and Implications for the Asian Future

In summing up, it can be argued that confidence-building measures in the Helsinki Process played

a vital role in Europe during the Cold War. The negotiation of the enhancement of measures and their achievements helped de-escalate international tensions and created a favourable environment to end the Cold War. At the core of this process was the recognition of the principle of risk reduction - all 35 states of the CSCE agreed on the necessity to reduce the risk of war. This convergence of positions, in contrast to the conflicting views regarding human rights provisions, sustained the Helsinki Process even during the toughest times under the Second Cold War.

Equally important was the multilateral structure of the CSCE. Participation by 35 states, including the Neutral and Non-aligned countries such as Austria or Finland, as well as Western European countries, which often took different positions from the two superpowers, frequently influenced the outcome. These dynamics were important during the times of the Second Cold War, when intense rivalry between Washington and Moscow hindered bilateral dialogue.

At the height of international tensions at the beginning of 1984, just around the same time as the Conference on Disarmament in Europe started in Stockholm, a renowned scholar, Thomas Schelling, stressed the importance of confidence-building to avoid nuclear catastrophe (Schelling, 1984). In his article, he distinguished two interrelated types of confidence-building measures: (1) those that legitimately strengthen confidence and reduce anxiety in a crisis, (2) those that cumulatively and progressively build confidence over time. The experience in the Helsinki Process also demonstrates the close connection between the two, with new insights. The measures initially inclined towards the latter in the Helsinki Final Act gradually acquired the character of the former, with discussions of the measures themselves also contributing to stability during crises. This led to further institutionalisation, leading to the post-Cold War European security structure. This offers a compelling lesson from the Cold War experience in Europe.

Let us move on to the implications for the Asian future. There are similarities between Cold War Europe in the first half of the 1980s and East Asia in the 2020s. First, the possibility of accidental military conflict at hotspots is real. In Europe, there had been possibilities of a conflict across the Iron Curtain, where millions of troops faced off. At the time, there were renewed discussions of conventional deterrence (see, for example, Mearsheimer, 1983). In East Asia, there are equally hotspots, namely the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait, with more on the list. With recent incidents such as the collision between the two Chinese government vessels in the South China Sea (in August 2025) and the crossfire between Thailand and Cambodia, the danger is real. Second, the

military build-up is speeding up. In Cold War Europe, the deployment of intermediate-range nuclear missiles accelerated in the first half of the 1980s, triggering the Euromissiles crisis. In East Asia, military spending is also gaining pace. Third, Washington is unpredictable and often unreliable. In Cold War Europe, countries were sometimes caught by surprise by the unpredictable US behaviour, such as the Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars Program). Needless to say, we are having challenges coping with the Trump Administration.

Political differences aside, negotiation and introduction of enhanced CBMs in Asia could ease tensions, as we have seen in the case of Europe. While it may seem that negotiation is difficult under the climate, it is exactly such a condition that confidence-building measures are of use. Reaching an agreement may be the thing of the future, but continued negotiation of such measures may still make a difference. The key to success is a gradual process. A small step in Helsinki led to substantial change more than a decade later – we should not lose hope in the time-consuming, gradual process. That being said, a gradual process does not always lead to outstanding success, as we know from the experience of the ASEAN Regional Forum. Furthermore, we have another challenge – the issue of recognition of North Korea and Taiwan – somewhat similar to the problems posed by East Germany until the late 1960s. Yet, there are still opportunities to be discovered. That leads to the decisive role of non-great powers. In Europe, both NATO allies such as France and the UK, and Non-Aligned States such as Sweden and Austria became a stimulus in invigorating and upholding the Helsinki Process. There must be an important role for non-great powers in Asia as well. It is high time that we gather our wisdom to create a safer future for Asia.

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¹ The terminology for addressing the three pillars differs, depending on authors/commentators. To give an example, terms such as “three pillars of European arms control” (Gottemoeller, 2012), “three pillars of conventional arms control” (Schmitt, 2018), or “major pillars of conventional arms control in Europe” (Bielieskov, 2022) have been used. All commentators agree on the composition of the three pillars.

² Russia suspended the implementation of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe in 2007, and completely withdrew in 2023. The US exited the Treaty on Open Skies in 2020, and Russia retaliated months later. Russia suspended the exchange of information stipulated by the Vienna Document in 2023.

