ROLES REPORT No.66

Looking back to the Helsinki Final Act:

What made it possible and what is its contemporary relevance for Asia?

Bart Gaens

Senior Research Fellow, Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Japan Chair, International Centre for Defence and Security

2026.4

ROLES Special Reports

東京大学 先端科学技術研究センター
Research Center for Advanced Science and Technology
The University of Tokyo

ROLES REPORT

ROLES REPORT No.66

Looking back to the Helsinki Final Act:

What made it possible and what is its contemporary relevance for Asia?

Bart Gaens

Senior Research Fellow, Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Japan Chair, International Centre for Defence and Security

2026.4

発行所：　東京大学先端科学技術研究センター
創発戦略研究オープンラボ（ROLES）
〒153-8904　東京都目黒区駒場 4-6-1

電話：　03-5452-5462

Web サイト：　https://roles.rcast.u-tokyo.ac.jp/

ROLES Special Reports

東京大学 先端科学技術研究センター
Research Center for Advanced Science and Technology
The University of Tokyo

1. Introduction

The year 2025 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), which was launched in Helsinki in 1975. Four years before the anniversary, in 2021, Finnish President Sauli Niinistö proposed to revive the Spirit of Helsinki by holding a commemorative summit in 2025 to promote genuine dialogue on security, human rights and global challenges such as the Arctic and climate change (Pesu and Vanhanen 2021). This renewal of the Helsinki spirit went hand in hand with a debate on how make the CSCE, renamed Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 1994, more attractive to actors such as the US and Russia, for example by potentially including China (Reynolds and Ketola 2022, 3). Then, in February 2022, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and the debate on a reinvigorated Helsinki spirit faded.

Nevertheless, during Finland's chairpersonship of the OSCE in 2025, a commemorative Helsinki+50 high-level conference took place on 31 July 2025 at Helsinki's Finlandia Hall, the original venue of the CSCE, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act. In his opening speech, Finnish President Alexander Stubb emphasized that we currently face the choice of returning to a world marked by spheres of interest and the use of violence, or by the sovereignty of states and common rules and principles. It is the latter choice that embodies the true Helsinki spirit: cooperation rooted in common principles, dialogue and mutual respect (Stubb 2025). In spite of the subdued atmosphere at the conference due to increasing pessimism surrounding the potential of international cooperation, the event was a success for a threefold reason. First, there was a renewed emphasis on the Helsinki Final Act's 10 key principles, the so-called decalogue, and its norms and values as guidelines for inter-state behavior that remain as valid as they were fifty years ago. Second, especially eye-catching was the focus on inclusive dialogue and civil society. The conference clearly highlighted the important role of civil society organizations in advancing respect for OSCE principles and commitments. Third, the presence of Mongolian Foreign Minister Batmunkh Battsetsegin underscored the contemporary global relevance of the Spirit of Helsinki, including for international relations in Asia.

This short article first looks back on the Helsinki Process, surveying what made it possible and what was Finland's role. Thereafter it assesses the question whether the Helsinki Process has relevance for the security situation in Asia today.

2. Historical background and the role of Finland

Proposals by the Soviet Union for an all-European security conference can be traced back to the 1950s. Soviet

drivers for such a conference were clear: to have the post-World War II division of Europe fixed and unchallenged; to set in stone the principle of non-interference in internal affairs; and broadly to legitimize the Soviet sphere of interest in Eastern Europe. After numerous proposals were rejected as propaganda, and Austria as a neutral country between 1966 and 1968 declined to host a similar conference, Finland launched its CSCE initiative on 5 May 1969. Why did Finland step up to the plate? First, it is important to recognize that the Finnish proposal did not mean closer alignment with Moscow, in other words it should not be seen as an example of "Finlandization" or accommodation to the will of a great power, but rather "as a move to regain room for manoeuvre in foreign policy" (Fischer 2009, 192). Following the blow to détente in the aftermath of the violent suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968, Finnish President Urho Kekkonen saw the pan-European conference as an opportunity to ease Soviet pressure on Finnish neutrality. It was also a way to delay having to deal with Soviet pressure to recognize the GDR, as Finland was the only Western European country with equal relations to both German entities (ibid., 186).

In the early 1970s, when a shift to détente took place, Western leaders agreed to reconsider the negotiations for a pan-European conference. The Helsinki consultations started in 1972, and led to the opening of the CSCE in the Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Helsinki in July 1973. This was followed by two years of negotiations in Geneva (1973-1975). Finally, on 1 August 1975, 35 countries signed the Helsinki Final Act in the Finnish capital. The Act was structured around four baskets of commitments: first, security in Europe; second, economic, scientific and environmental cooperation; third, human rights and humanitarian issues; and fourth, follow-up, dissemination and future meetings. The first basket included the principles guiding inter-state relations, the so-called decalogue: sovereign equality and respect for rights inherent in sovereignty; refraining from the threat or use of force; inviolability of frontiers; territorial integrity of states, peaceful settlement of disputes, non-intervention in internal affairs; respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief; equal rights and self-determination of peoples; cooperation among states; and fulfillment in good faith of obligations under international law. These principles were not politically binding or legally enforceable, but nevertheless had a profound normative influence, in particular on sovereignty and human rights issues. Furthermore, the agreement was fundamentally aimed at security, but defined in broad terms as comprehensive and cooperative security.

The Helsinki Final Act was essentially a compromise. The West de facto recognized the existing borders in Europe as inviolable, including the two German states as separate entities within their existing borders; and the Soviet Union accepted the language on human rights, freedom of communication and movement, and

peaceful change. Throughout the Cold War the spirit of Helsinki became a foundation for European security, embodying the power of value politics and civil societies in promoting change (Reynolds and Ketola 2022, 4). Indeed, what has come to be known as "the Helsinki effect" resulted in a boost in civil society groups in Eastern Europe, holding their governments accountable for the human rights commitments included in the final act, eventually leading to the fall of the Iron Curtain and the end of the Cold War. All over Eastern Europe citizen groups arose, including the Moscow Helsinki Groups, the first one of which was founded in 1976 by Soviet dissidents. This inspired similar civic movements in Eastern bloc countries, including in Czechoslovakia (Charter 77, launched in 1977) and Poland (Solidarność, founded in 1980). These became powerful symbols of peaceful resistance and civic courage, influencing later democratic movements and the Velvet Revolution (Czechoslovakia 1989), the Round Table Talks (Poland 1989) and similar negotiations between opposition groups and the communist regimes in Hungary, Bulgaria and East Germany.

The USA was initially highly skeptical about the CSCE and the Helsinki Principles. Henri Kissinger at the time famously dismissed the importance of the CSCE talks in 1974 (Office of the Historian, 1974):

I couldn't care less what they do in the European Security Conference. They can write it in Swahili for all I care. But that isn't the point to me at all. The Conference can never end up with a meaningful document. And I think precisely because it wasn't meaningful, it seems to me totally undermining confidence.

Kissinger had to change his mind later, acknowledging that the Helsinki process became a powerful tool for human rights activists and proved to be the political and legal basis for pursuing the issue of human rights in East-West relations, eventually contributing to the erosion of Soviet control in Eastern Europe. Former US Defense Secretary Robert Gates, as well, recognized Helsinki's impact (Radio Free Europe, 2007): "Well, we didn't think we had any leverage when we went to Helsinki in 1975, and it ended up playing a major part in the collapse of the Soviet Union and in the liberation of Eastern Europe."

For Finland the CSCE became a crucial element in the country's foreign policy. It placed Finland on the map as an independent actor in global affairs throughout the Cold War, and in the post-Cold War era it continued to act as a driving force in maintaining the CSCE as an important forum to discuss European security. In particular Finland made a key contribution to establishing the idea of "comprehensive security" (Reynolds and Ketola, 2022, 5). Finland also succeeded in embedding crucial principles for its own independence, such as territorial integrity and non-intervention, within a multilateral framework, reducing Soviet pressure, at

least temporarily. Furthermore, Finland's role in the Helsinki Process allowed for economic cooperation with both East and West. It allowed Finland to demonstrate its neutrality, acting as an international problem-solver and mediator (Clerc 2023, 45) and a bridge between East and West. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and Finland's ensuing NATO membership marked a clear end to neutrality and the Finnish bridge-building foreign policy.

At present, the OSCE has 57 participating states, headquarters and a secretariat in Vienna, and other offices in The Hague and Warsaw. It has had missions in 20 states. The Helsinki spirit of cooperative security resulted in a wide range of new institutions reflecting this optimism, including the Council of Baltic Sea States (1992), the Arctic Council (1996) and the NATO-Russia Council (2002) (Saari and Karjalainen 2025, 4). However, in general it can be said that the OSCE is an institution in crisis, not least caused by Russia's successive violations of numerous principles at the heart of the Helsinki process, such as the sovereignty of states, the prohibition of the use of force, and the inviolability of borders and territorial integrity (Georgia 2008, Crimea 2014, Ukraine 2022, see Bond 2025, 3). Indeed, the OSCE is grounded in consensus-based decision-making and non-binding guidelines, rendering it vulnerable in the absence of a supranational power that can force countries to follow international law and agreements, or put in motion mechanisms of accountability.

One particular problem has been Russia's reinterpretation of the concept of indivisible security, in the sense that the security of every participating state is inseparably linked to that of all the others, and no state has the right to treat others as in its sphere of influence. Furthermore, every state has the right to determine its political and economic system, as well as its foreign policy including membership in international organizations and alliances. However, Russia has revisited the concept to justify its military interventions, and claim spheres of interest. For Russia, the indivisibility of security in Europe, as referred to in the preamble of Basket I of the Final Act, means that no state should strengthen its security at the expense of another. It thereby imposes limits on its neighbors' sovereignty, NATO enlargement, or the presence of military equipment and personnel in the Baltic states (Saari and Karjalainen 2025, 5). In addition, cooperative security is currently also under threat by the second US administration under President Donald Trump, who seemingly shares certain views on spheres of interest or the rules-based international order. In spite of the current impasse, the OSCE and its guiding principles and shared norms for inter-state conduct remain valuable. The possibility of a future dialogue should be retained, in spite of the current lack of trust. At the very least the OSCE can function as a diplomatic signal post to manage distrust. In view of Europe's ongoing shift towards a more autonomous defense posture, the need remains for political détente and the management of risks including escalation.

3. The Spirit of Helsinki: Relevance for Asia?

The Helsinki Process has inspired numerous Asian countries to model a region-wide security framework on the CSCE/OSCE. The Helsinki model is certainly attractive to Asian countries, not least in view of its emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference, which is key to Asia's post-colonial states as well as ASEAN's multilateral dialogues. Also, the focus on consensus-based decision-making, flexible procedures and confidence-building measures (CBMs) chime with many Asian states. Furthermore, the avoidance of legalistic implications, the "constructive ambiguity" of OSCE documents, the focus on human security and dignity all align well with Asian values, and can be helpful for further developing institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) (Buchsbaum 2004, 360). In fact, the Helsinki Final Act was likely an influence on ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), signed in 1976, as well as the ARF. As argued by Patomäki (2024), the prime aim of the CSCE process was to institutionalize dialogue and reduce military competition, which is crucial in today's geopolitical climate. The US-China rivalry playing out in East Asia necessitates a new focus on confidence-building measures and mutual concessions. Especially relevant for East Asia is the need for pluralism in rights discourses, including the importance of addressing socio-economic rights (ibid.).

In 2013 ROK President Park Gyeun-hye launched the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI), a multilateral dialogue process aiming to contribute to stability in Northeast Asia by promoting trust based on so-called trustpolitik. The initiative was drawing on the OSCE and its core concepts of common, comprehensive, cooperative security, but with a focus on "soft" security issues. Aspiring explicitly to encourage the participation of the DPRK, the initiative centered on cooperation among Northeast Asian countries in certain functional areas, primarily in the field of non-traditional security (nuclear safety, energy security, environment, cyberspace, health, drugs, and disaster management). The initiative sought to eventually feed into, and seek collaboration with, other global institutions and players such as the UN, the EU, NATO, and ASEAN. The OSCE was an explicit model, and South Korea aimed to play the role of facilitator, akin to Finland's role in the Helsinki Process (OSCE 2015). NAPCI was short-lived, however, due to domestic political change and insufficient regional backing.

The same idea of using the experience of the OSCE as a possible way to alleviate tensions on the Korean peninsula reverberated in the US Helsinki Commission, an independent agency of the US government, that visited Japan and South Korea in 2017 to discuss a security arrangement for Northeast Asia inspired by the

Helsinki Final Act, including to deal with the heightened tensions on the Korean peninsula (Killion and Massaro 2017). The Commission argued that an OSCE-inspired regional security organization in Northeast Asia could help develop norms to which North Korea eventually could be held. More recently, in 2022, Natsuo Yamaguchi, the head of the Kômeitô, a long-time key partner for Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party until 2025, proposed the creation of a permanent regional framework, modelled on the OSCE, in East Asia to include China, the US, ASEAN and others. For Yamaguchi, Japan should take the lead in creating such a framework, in order to promote dialogue and avoid conflict (Johnson 2022).

One particular proponent of a Helsinki model for application in Asia has been Mongolia. In 2012 Mongolia was accepted as a full participating state in the OSCE as the only Asian country, following its involvement as Asian Partner for Cooperation since 2004. Other partners in Asia include Japan (1992), South Korea (1994), Thailand (2000), and Australia (2009). For Mongolia, the OSCE ties in with the country's Third Neighbor policy seeking to diversify its partnerships beyond China and Russia, to include countries such as the United States, Japan, South Korea, India, France, and Germany. During the Cold War, Mongolia was closely aligned with the Soviet Union, but the Helsinki Process influenced Mongolia to pursue a more balanced and independent foreign policy during the post-Cold war period, influenced by the OSCE. Mongolia arguably was eager to learn from the example of Finland, with the ultimate aim to align with liberal democracies to reinforce Mongolia's democratic governance. The Helsinki Process's principles such as respect for human rights, democratic governance and peaceful dispute resolution are at the core of the Third Neighbor policy, and they have allowed the country to profile itself as a neutral and constructive actor in international affairs. In a nutshell, Mongolia aims to avoid excessive influence from Russia and China, attract trade and investment from other partners, strengthen defense ties and participate in peacekeeping, and align with countries sharing Mongolia's democratic norms and values.

Mongolia aims to maintain friendly ties with all the great powers and benefit economically, while being located at the merging point of different geopolitical strategies (Mendee 2022, 23). Especially in terms of connectivity and infrastructure development, China, Russia but also the US and Japan have a strong presence. China and Russia are constructing a natural gas pipeline, the Power of Siberia 2, through Mongolia, while Japan, through its development agency JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) is expanding its activities to promote sustainable economic growth, high-quality infrastructure and an inclusive society. Especially because Mongolia is "regionless" in the sense that there is no regional security alliance it can join. Just like Finland during the Cold War, it therefore has to make strategic concessions to the great powers

(Mendee 2022, 25). Mongolia's neutrality policy necessitates the country to limit security cooperation to peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and defence diplomacy, promoting itself as a neutral place for all great powers to negotiate, similar to the Finnish model of the Helsinki process.

The OSCE has observed Mongolian elections, and the Helsinki Final Act's principles help to foster priorities such as civil society, democracy, fundamental rights, and gender equality. Regionally OSCE membership allows Mongolia to promote cooperative security and confidence-building measures in Eurasia. Showing that Mongolia aims to serve as a bridge between the OSCE and East Asia, the idea of an OSCE Policy Center in Mongolia was floated (Enkhbat 2024). All the above clearly demonstrates that the OSCE and Helsinki Final Act have aroused attention and interest beyond Europe, giving rise to speculations on the applicability of a European model of security community for other regions.

At the same time, applicability of the OSCE model is highly limited. Restrictive factors include the high priority given to fundamental freedoms, human rights and democratic institutions, the obligatory military CBMs, the minor importance attached to economic issues (and socio-economic rights), the priority given to multilateralism to the detriment of bilateral relations, and the (perhaps false) perception that Asia is vastly more diverse in terms of religion or ethnicity than Europe (Buchsbaum 2004). However, while not offering a blueprint, the Helsinki Process's emphasis on dialogue, confidence-building, and cooperative security will at the very least remain a source of inspiration for Asia.

Conclusion

The CSCE, the Helsinki Final Act and its core principles of common, comprehensive and cooperative security became the foundation of European security. It gave a boost to civil society groups throughout Eastern Europe, eventually leading to the fall of the Iron Curtain and the end of the Cold War. The Helsinki Process enabled Finland to multilateralize crucial principles for its own independence, such as territorial integrity and non-intervention. It also enabled Finland to portray itself as an independent and neutral actor in global affairs, and as a problem-solver, mediator and bridge between East and West. While the OSCE is currently in crisis due Russia's successive violations of key principles at the heart of the Helsinki process, its shared norms for inter-state conduct remain valuable. Furthermore, the OSCE remains an appropriate venue for future dialogue to, if nothing else, manage distrust. Countries such as South Korea, Japan and Mongolia have all attempted to draw lessons from the Helsinki Process in order to create a region-wide security framework in Northeast Asia. Mongolia in particular has sought to find inspiration from the Finnish experience during the Cold War to

promote neutrality, hedge its bets and, sandwiched between China and Russia, implement a Third Neighbor policy. While a direct application of the OSCE model in Asia is highly challenging, continued interest in the OSCE from Asian countries attests to its sustained global relevance.

References

Bond, I. (2025) "The Helsinki Final Act at 50: Relevant, or a relic?" *CER Insight*, Centre for European Reform, 28 July.

Buchsbaum, T.M. (2004) "East Asian security: Can the OSCE's experience be helpful?" in Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg / IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2003*, Nomos, 349-363.

Clerc, L. (2023) *Cultural diplomacy in Cold War Finland: Identity, geopolitics and the welfare state*. Springer Nature.

Enkhbat, N. (2024) "It's time to establish an OSCE policy center in Mongolia" *Strategic Focus Series*, Institute for Strategic Studies, 18 April. https://en.iss.gov.mn/?p=1558

Fischer, T. (2009) "'A mustard seed grew into a bushy tree': The Finnish CSCE initiative of 5 May 1969: Ending the Cold War in Europe". *Cold War History*, 9(2), pp.177-201.

Johnson, J. (2022) "Komeito chief calls for Japan to create a Asian security framework" *Japan Times*, 2 January. https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/01/02/national/politics-diplomacy/natsuo-yamaguchi-asian-security/

Killion, D. and Massaro, P. (2017) "The OSCE as a model: Asian insights". *Helsinki Commission Report*, 5 May. https://www.csce.gov/publications/osce-model-asian-insights/

Mendee, J. (2022) "Renewed geopolitical rivalries: Challenges and options for Mongolia" in Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Mongolia and Mongolian Institute for Innovative Policies (eds) *Mongolian geopolitics*, FES Mongolia.

Office of the Historian. “Minutes of Secretary of State Kissinger’s staff meeting”. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, Volume XXXIX, European Security, Document 265. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v39/d265

OSCE (2015) “The OSCE: An inspiration for Asia” *Security Community* Issue 1, 7 July. https://www.osce.org/magazine/171281

Patomäki, Heikki (2024) “The relevance of the Helsinki Process and the Charter of Paris for future security policies and institutions” *Ritsumeikan kokusai kenkyû* 36(4), March https://patomaki.fi/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/PATOMAKI-The-Relevance-of-the-Helsinki-Process-Ritsumeikan-Review.pdf

Pesu, M. and Vanhanen, H. (2021) “President Niinistö’s two-track initiative. Towards Arctic dialogue and a revitalization of the Helsinki Spirit?” *FIIA Comment* 6, April.

Radio Free Europe (2007) “U.S.: Defense Secretary says ‘nobody wants a new Cold War’” *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, October 23. https://www.rferl.org/a/1079010.html

Reynolds, R. and Ketola, J. (2022) “The OSCE and a 21st century spirit of Helsinki: Opportunities to shift security back to the people”, *FIIA Briefing Paper* 346.

Saari, S. and Karjalainen, T. (2025) “The boom and crash of cooperative security in Europe. Fours scenarios for the future” *FIIA Briefing Paper* 408, March.

Stubb, A. (2025) *Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Alexander Stubb in the Helsinki+50 Conference at the Finlandia Hall on 31 July 2025*. https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-alexander-stubb-in-the-helsinki50-conference-at-the-finlandia-hall-on-31-july-2025/


ROLES
Special Reports