NATO WATCH

The Helsinki Final Act at 50:

The impact on NATO-Russia relations and future possibilities

Rethink Europe Discussion Papers
No.1 - August 2025

About NATO Watch

NATO Watch is **a not-for-profit, independent information service**, which works to promote public awareness and foster debate on the role of **NATO** in public life.

.

The Helsinki Final Act at 50:

The impact on NATO-Russia relations and future possibilities

Ian Davis

Rethink Europe Discussion Papers
No.1 – August 2025

Table of Contents

About the Author

Ian Davis is the founder and director of NATO Watch. He has a rich background in the NGO sector. He received both his Ph.D. and B.A. in Peace Studies from the University of Bradford, in the United Kingdom. He is the Executive Editor of the SIPRI Yearbook and an Associate Senior Fellow within the Conflict and Peace programme at SIPRI. He was formerly Director of SIPRI's Editorial, Publications and Library Department (2014-2016), Executive Director of the British American Security Information Council (BASIC) (2001-2007) and Programme Manager at Saferworld (1998-2001). He has expertise in British and US defence and foreign policy, transatlantic security issues, the international arms trade and arms control and disarmament issues.

Acknowledgements

During the preparation of this work, the author used LM Arena (ChatGPT 4.0 and Qwen 3-30b) to assist with text generation. The output was reviewed and edited by the author, who takes full responsibility for the final content. The author is grateful to Martin Smith for comments on an earlier draft of this policy brief.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

CSBMs	Confidence- and Security-Building Measures
CSCE	Conference for Security Cooperation in Europe
EU	European Union
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

Key Takeaways

- The Helsinki Final Act, signed in 1975 by 35 nations, including the Soviet Union and the US, marked a **milestone in Cold War détente** and laid the foundation for the OSCE..
- The Act comprised **three main baskets**:
  - **Security**: Principles like territorial integrity, non-aggression, and confidence-building measures.
  - **Economic Cooperation**: Trade, energy, and environmental collaboration.
  - **Human Rights & Humanitarian Issues**: Freedom of movement, human rights protections, and cultural exchanges.
- From **NATO's perspective**:
  - Initially viewed with suspicion but became a strategic tool to undermine the Eastern Bloc internally through human rights provisions (Basket Three).
  - Post-Cold War, it justified NATO's expansion and interventions in the Balkans, emphasizing sovereign choice of alliances.
  - Russia's violations of the Act (e.g., Crimea annexation, Ukraine invasion) have reinforced NATO's core mission of collective defence.
- From **Russia's perspective**:
  - Initially a diplomatic victory securing its sphere of influence and recognition of post-WWII borders.
  - Post-Soviet Russia grew disillusioned, seeing NATO expansion as a betrayal of the Act's spirit and a threat to its security.
  - Under Putin, Russia views the Act as a Western tool to undermine its sovereignty and justifies its revisionist policies accordingly.
- A **new Helsinki Final Act** could aim to:
  - Rebuild trust and reduce military confrontation risks.
  - Reaffirm sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-use of force.
  - Address modern security challenges like cyber and hybrid warfare.
  - Establish mechanisms for dialogue, transparency, and crisis management.
  - Balance interests of all states, including smaller ones.
- **Challenges for a new Act** include:
  - Need for unprecedented NATO-Russia cooperation.
  - Crafting a balanced human rights dialogue avoiding Western imposition.
  - Designing effective decision-making mechanisms combining consensus and majority voting, with institutionalized **dialogue to reconcile differing views on 'security indivisibility'**.
- **Track 1.5 dialogues** and working groups could build confidence through practical agreements on deployments, cyber norms and regional flashpoints.
- The Annex **proposes four baskets for a new Act**: modernized security with arms control and crisis management; economic interdependence and resilience; a renewed human dimension emphasizing shared values and civil society; and regional governance reform including OSCE transformation and new multilateral frameworks for security cooperation:
- Additionally, **reconsideration of NATO's role** may be necessary, given its expansion post-Cold War and the sidelining of the OSCE. A new European security architecture may require a more balanced, multipolar approach to military security cooperation.
- The overall **goal is to create a more stable, cooperative European security order** and avoid continued confrontation. This will require genuine political will and compromise.

.

I. Introduction

On the 1 August the Helsinki Final Act celebrated 50 years, and the anniversary was marked a day earlier by high-level speeches and panels in the Finnish capital.[1] The agreement, signed by 35 nations including the Soviet Union and the United States back in 1975, was a high watermark of Cold War détente and paved the way for today's Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

The Helsinki Final Act is a significant document in the history of Cold War diplomacy. It was not a military treaty, but a political agreement that fundamentally reshaped the strategic environment in which NATO and the Soviet Union/Russia operated. While it aimed to improve relations between East and West, its focus was broader, encompassing security, economic and humanitarian cooperation among a wider group of all European states (with the sole exception of Albania), the US and Canada. It was built around three 'baskets':

1. Security (Frontier inviolability, non-aggression, military confidence-building measures);
2. Economic Cooperation (Trade, energy, environmental collaboration); and
3. Human Rights & Humanitarian Issues (Freedom of movement, human rights, cultural exchanges).

With the creation of the OSCE in the 1990s, the third human rights basket was expanded to include the protection of national minorities, press freedom and creation of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), which still sets standards for election observation missions.

The Helsinki Final Act significantly shaped the evolution of NATO-Russia relations over the past half century in several ways. This discussion paper – the first in a new series on rethinking European security - discusses the 50-year legacy of the Act from both the NATO and Russian perspective, since these differences are at the heart of the current divisions between the two sides. It then asks how a new Helsinki process might be constructed to rebuild bridges between them.

[1] OSCE, Helsinki+50 Conference: Respecting the Legacy, Preparing for the Future, 31 July 2025, <https://www.osce.org/chairpersonship/591551>.

II. The NATO perspective

Initially viewed with suspicion by many in the alliance, the Act eventually became a tool that helped the West 'win' the Cold War, a framework for NATO's post-Cold War expansion, and today, a standard by which Russia's aggression is judged.[2] The impact can be broken down into three distinct phases.

Phase 1: The Cold War era (1975-1989) – A double-edged sword

Initially, the Act provided a diplomatic framework for NATO-Warsaw Pact relations during the Cold War, establishing principles like territorial integrity, peaceful dispute resolution, and respect for human rights that NATO could invoke when dealing with the Soviet bloc.

During the era of détente, the Helsinki Final Act was a product of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE, later OSCE), creating a complementary security institution alongside NATO that addressed aspects of European security beyond military matters. The agreement was structured around three "baskets" of issues, and its impact on NATO was initially paradoxical.

Many NATO hardliners were deeply sceptical of the Helsinki process. This included certain segments within the US and UK governments and political spectrum (and to a lesser extent within France, Greece, Turkey and West Germany). Notable sceptics included Henry Kissinger, François Mitterrand, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. They feared it was a Soviet trap to achieve its long-standing goal: the formal recognition of post-WWII borders in Europe, including the division of Germany and the absorption of the Baltic states. It also reflected long-standing Soviet interest (dating back to the 1950s) in superseding NATO with a pan-European security framework. *Basket One*, which included the principle of the 'inviolability of frontiers', seemed to hand the Soviet Union a major political victory, legitimizing its sphere of influence. For NATO, this was a cause for concern, as it appeared to cement the very division the Alliance was created to oppose.

However, the West, particularly the United States, insisted on including what became *Basket Three* on 'Co-operation in Humanitarian and Other Fields'. This basket contained groundbreaking principles on fundamental freedoms, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief, and the protection of human rights. This turned out to be a strategic masterstroke. While non-binding, Basket Three provided a powerful moral and political tool. Dissident movements across the Eastern Bloc, such as Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia and Solidarity in Poland, were able to use the Helsinki Accords to publicly hold their governments accountable. They could claim that their governments were violating an international agreement they themselves had signed.

This dissident pressure weakened the Warsaw Pact from within, eroding the legitimacy and stability of its member regimes. Although not necessarily recognised as such at the time, for NATO this was a form of political warfare that achieved more than military posturing alone could. It helped 'win' the Cold War by fostering internal pressure on NATO's primary adversary.

A key part of Basket One included Confidence- and Security-Building Measures (CSBMs), such

[2] The prevailing view is that the West, primarily the United States, "won" the Cold War. This is largely because the Cold War concluded with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, leaving the US as the sole remaining superpower. However, the Cold War wasn't truly "won" but rather ended with a significant shift in global power dynamics, leaving behind a complex and evolving geopolitical landscape. See, e.g. Richard Falk, Did the West win the Cold War?, 6 Nov. 2019.

as requiring prior notification of major military manoeuvres. This directly impacted the NATO-Warsaw Pact military standoff. By creating a degree of transparency, the CSBMs reduced the risk of a surprise attack or a conflict triggered by misinterpreting a large-scale military exercise. This introduced a small but significant element of predictability into a dangerously tense environment. In particular, the 1986 Stockholm agreement, formally the Stockholm Document, was highly significant for enhancing CSBMs.[3]

Phase 2: The Post-Cold War era (1990s-2000s) – A framework for a New Europe

With the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union, the principles of the Helsinki Final Act became central to shaping the new European security architecture. In particular, the Act became a cornerstone of NATO's justification for its 'Open Door' policy, since it enshrined the principle of the sovereign right of each state to choose its own security arrangements. When Russia protested the accession of former Warsaw Pact countries like Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, NATO could point to the Helsinki Final Act—which Russia's predecessor, the Soviet Union, had signed—as the foundational principle allowing these nations to join the Alliance. This provided a powerful diplomatic and legal argument for NATO's expansion.

When the CSCE evolved into the OSCE it formed a complementary relationship to NATO, with the latter increasingly seen as the provider of 'hard security' (military defence), while the former, built on Helsinki principles, focused on 'soft security'—conflict prevention, election monitoring and human rights. This framework guided NATO's actions in this period.

The human rights principles of Basket Three, for example, provided part of the normative framework for NATO's interventions in the Balkans. While controversial, interventions in Bosnia (1995) and Kosovo (1999) were justified by NATO leaders as necessary to prevent mass human rights violations and ethnic cleansing—a direct echo of the humanitarian commitments made in Helsinki. Moreover, both NATO and the OSCE developed pragmatic co-operation on the ground in Bosnia and Kosovo following the conclusion of hostilities, with NATO running military stabilisation operations and the OSCE taking the lead in election supervision and monitoring. This pragmatic inter-institutional co-operation in Bosnia from 1995-96 and in Kosovo since 1999, while demonstrating a willingness to work together on security issues, it did not fully represent a fully functioning European security architecture. Rather it was seen as a cooperative response to specific crises rather than a comprehensive, integrated system.

Phase 3: The era of renewed confrontation (2008-Present) – The violated standard

The most recent phase has seen Russia's flagrant violation of Helsinki principles, which in turn has had a galvanizing effect on NATO. Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 and, most significantly, its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, systematically dismantled the core tenets of the Helsinki Final Act. These actions violated:

- The inviolability of frontiers.
- The territorial integrity of states.
- The prohibition on the threat or use of force.
- The peaceful settlement of disputes.

Russia's disregard for the Helsinki order

[3] OSCE, Document of the Stockholm Conference, 19 Sept. 1986, <https://www.osce.org/fsc/41238>.

shattered the post-Cold War illusion of a cooperative Europe. This had a dramatic impact on NATO. It forced NATO to pivot sharply away from out-of-area crisis management and back to its original core mission: the collective defence of its members against a major state aggressor. Russia's violation of the Act provided the undeniable political justification for NATO's military buildup on its eastern flank (e.g., the Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic states and Poland). NATO could frame this not as aggression, but as a necessary defensive response to the destruction of the agreed-upon security order.

The clarity of Russia's transgressions against these foundational principles unified the Alliance to an extent not seen in decades. It provided a clear moral and political rallying cry that resonated across all member states, leading to increased defence spending and the accession of historically neutral countries like Finland and Sweden.

Conclusion

From a NATO perspective, the Helsinki Final Act has been a journey from suspicion to strategic tool, to foundational framework, and finally, to a violated standard that has re-energized the Alliance. What began as a non-binding political declaration of principles has, over 50 years, become deeply intertwined with NATO's identity and strategic direction. In the Cold War, it helped undermine NATO's adversary from within. In the post-Cold War era, it provided the political and moral justification for NATO's transformation and expansion, and its 1990s Balkan interventions. In the 21st century, the flagrant violation of its principles by Russia has become the primary catalyst for NATO's modern-day resurgence, reminding the world of the Alliance's core purpose: to defend the very principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and peace that the Helsinki Final Act sought to establish.

III. The Russian perspective

Russia's perspective on the Helsinki Final Act over the past 50 years has evolved significantly, shaped by its historical, geopolitical and ideological context. While the Soviet Union initially viewed the Accords as a tool to consolidate its influence in Eastern Europe, the post-Soviet Russian Federation has increasingly framed the document as a Western instrument of control and a threat to its sovereignty. Again, the impact can be broken down into three distinct phases.

Phase 1: A diplomatic victory and a tool for legitimisation (1975-1989)

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union saw the Helsinki Final Act as a strategic opportunity to solidify its dominance in Eastern Europe. The first basket (inviolability of frontiers) allowed the Soviet Union to formalise the division of Europe and the absorption of the Baltic states, which it considered legitimate under the post-WWII order. This aligned with the Soviet goal of stabilising its sphere of influence and preventing Western interference. Hence, when the Soviet Union signed the Helsinki Final Act, it saw the agreement as a major diplomatic win. The Act appeared to legitimize the status quo, not to challenge it. The Soviet Union emphasised non-interference in internal affairs (a principle later invoked by Russia to justify its actions in Ukraine and Georgia). Moscow believed it had secured Western recognition of its sphere of influence, while the human rights provisions (Basket Three) were seen as non-binding and largely symbolic. The Soviet leadership initially resisted including human rights provisions, fearing (correctly) they could be used to undermine its control. However, the inclusion of these clauses was a compromise to secure broader international support for the Accords.

Phase 2: The post-Soviet disillusionment (1990s–2000s)

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's view of the Helsinki Act became more conflicted. The principle that states could choose their own alliances (enshrined in the Act) was used to justify NATO and EU enlargement into former Soviet and Warsaw Pact territories. Russia saw this as a betrayal of the 'spirit' of Helsinki, if not the letter, which was meant to promote cooperation rather than confrontation. Moscow argued that the West had exploited the Act's principles to expand its influence at Russia's expense, undermining the security guarantees and balance of power the Soviets thought they had secured. Russian officials often cite the principle of 'sovereign choice 'in the Accords to justify their opposition to NATO's expansion. While in the West the principle of 'sovereign choice', as noted above, is understood to mean states having the right to choose their own alliance arrangements, the Russian interpretation stresses 'security integrity' and the idea that no European state should enhance its own security at another's expense. The two "draft treaties" issued by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs shortly before the Ukraine invasion were premised on this kind of reasoning in seeking to halt and even roll back NATO enlargement.[4]

Russia has increasingly framed the Basket Three provisions (human rights, democracy,

[4] Russian Foreign Ministry, Agreement on measures to ensure the security of The Russian Federation and member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 17 Dec. 2021, <https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=en>; and Russian Foreign Ministry, Treaty between The United States of America and the Russian Federation on security guarantees, 17 Dec. 2021, <https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/?lang=en>.

and the rule of law) as ideological tools used by the West to undermine its sovereignty. It accuses Western countries of hypocrisy, pointing to its own record on human rights and the double standards of Western democracies.

Phase 3: The Putin era: The Act as a tool and a target (2008 – present)

Under Vladimir Putin, Russia's attitude toward the Helsinki Final Act has become openly revisionist and instrumental. Russia continues to invoke the Act's principles of sovereignty and non-interference when it suits its interests. Russian officials frequently accuse the West of hypocrisy, claiming that NATO and the EU have violated the Helsinki principles through military interventions (e.g., in Kosovo, Iraq, Libya) and by supporting 'colour revolutions' in the post-Soviet space. Moscow also argues that the West uses the human rights provisions of the Act as a pretext for interference in other countries' internal affairs, while ignoring Russia's own concerns.

Hence, Russia today rejects the Helsinki Accords as a framework for European security, viewing them as a legacy of Cold War-era Western hegemony. This shift is tied to its geopolitical rivalry with the West and its military interventions in Ukraine and Georgia. Russian leaders, including President Vladimir Putin, now often frame the Helsinki Accords as a tool of Western imperialism. They argue that the West exploited the Accords to justify NATO expansion and to undermine Russia's influence, while ignoring the realpolitik of the Cold War. This narrative is used to justify Russia's assertive foreign policy and to rally domestic support.

Russia now frames the Helsinki system as having been fatally undermined by Western actions—especially NATO enlargement and support for Ukraine. Russian leaders claim that the security order established in 1975 has been destroyed, justifying their own revisionist policies. Russian officials periodically call for a new European security agreement, arguing that the old order is obsolete and that Russia's interests must be recognized in any future settlement.[5]

The OSCE has become a focal point of Russian criticism. Moscow accuses the OSCE of bias against Russia and of being a Western-dominated institution that undermines its interests. Russia has withdrawn from some OSCE activities and criticized its role in monitoring elections and human rights in the post-Soviet space. Today, the Helsinki Final Act is viewed by Russia as a symbol of the West's strategic ambitions and a challenge to its geopolitical aspirations. It represents a relic of a Cold War order that it now seeks to replace with a multipolar world where Russia asserts its influence without Western interference.

Conclusion

Fifty years after the Helsinki Final Act, Russia's view of its impact is shaped by its evolving relationship with the West. While the Accords initially served as a tool to legitimize Soviet dominance, they have since become a point of contention in the broader struggle for European security. Russia now sees the document as a Western instrument of control that undermines its sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Act's principles, especially the right of states to choose alliances, are seen as having enabled the West to encroach on Russia's traditional sphere of influence. Moscow's rejection of the Accords reflects a broader ideological and geopolitical shift, as Russia seeks to redefine the rules of the international order in its favour. In this context, the Helsinki Final Act is not just a historical artifact but a contested symbol of the enduring tensions between Western liberal values and Russian assertiveness.

[5] As set out in the Russian Foreign Ministry's two draft treaties. See footnote 4.

IV. How might a new 'Helsinki' Final Act bridge the divide between NATO and Russia?

A new Helsinki Final Act, if it were to be conceived today, would need to address the deepening divide between NATO and Russia while reflecting the evolving security, economic, and ideological realities of the 21st century. Such an agreement would likely aim to rebuild trust, establish clear rules of engagement and create mechanisms for conflict prevention and cooperation. In terms of overarching goals, a new Helsinki Final Act would need to:

- Rebuild trust and reduce the risk of military confrontation.
- Reaffirm core principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-use of force.
- Address new security challenges (cyber, hybrid, energy, information warfare).
- Create mechanisms for dialogue, transparency, and crisis management.
- Balance the interests and security concerns of all parties, including smaller states.

It needs to be stressed that the challenges and preconditions for discussing a new Helsinki process are considerable. First, progress is unlikely without unprecedented cooperation between NATO and Russia, which is unlikely given current hostilities. However, it could serve as a symbolic gesture to open dialogue and allow a pathway to more concrete steps (e.g., a ceasefire or peace settlement in Ukraine). After at least a partial restoration of trust, it may be possible to create a more balanced and sustainable security order that addresses Russia's fear of NATO encroachment and NATO's concern about Russian influence. Second, any new Act must reaffirm the sovereignty and agency of all states, not just the interests of great powers. Third, the agreement must be able to evolve as new security challenges emerge.

The process of agreeing and implementing a new set of Helsinki Accords will also be challenging. Promoting a balanced dialogue on human rights, democracy and civil liberties (as a reimagined Basket Three) will be particularly challenging. It will be necessary to avoid framing it as a Western imposition (thereby addressing Russia's criticism of 'Western hegemony') but making it robust enough to create space for constructive dialogue on shared values, such as the protection of minority rights and the rule of law. Given that Helsinki is now a NATO capital, any 'Helsinki 2.0' talks will probably need to be held somewhere else, perhaps in one of the few remaining neutral cities such as Geneva or Vienna.

Discussions towards a Helsinki 2.0 could also explore additional baskets of measures designed to reset pan European security and enable the negotiation of collective solutions to problems, backed with the kind of conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peacebuilding institutions and mechanisms that the OSCE has never been allowed to properly develop. A potentially new basket on 'Conflict prevention and crisis management', for example, could create mechanisms to de-escalate tensions before they escalate into violence. Such a basket would address the lack of effective mechanisms to prevent escalation, as seen in the 2014 Crimea crisis and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Another basket might be designed to revitalise multilateral European institutions and address the erosion of trust in existing frameworks and create a platform for sustained dialogue. Similarly, a new 'Economic interdependence and stability' basket could help strengthen

economic ties and act as a deterrent to conflict, while addressing the root causes of competition over resources and markets.

Ideally, the process would involve inclusive dialogue with all European states, the US, Canada, and relevant international organisations (NATO, EU, OSCE, CSTO) involved. To ensure broad legitimacy, other key players (e.g., China, UN) could also be involved. While the original Helsinki Act was non-binding, a new Act could include a mix of political declarations and legally binding agreements. Stronger mechanisms for monitoring, verification and dispute resolution would also be needed to ensure commitments are upheld, as well as penalties for violations and incentives for compliance. Institutionalized follow-up meetings or review conferences would be needed to assess progress, adapt to new challenges and maintain dialogue. The framework would need to be flexible enough to address emerging threats (e.g., AI, climate change) while maintaining core principles.

Decision-making

Designing an effective decision-making mechanism for a new Helsinki process will be another key challenge and will require balancing inclusivity, legitimacy and practicality, while addressing geopolitical realities and the lessons learned from past iterations. The original CSCE operated by pure consensus aligning with its emphasis on mutual respect and equality but failed to enforce Basket 3 (human rights) in the 1970s–80s, as the Soviet Union ignored critiques. The OSCE's consensus-minus-one system worked better in the 1990s for issues like election monitoring and crisis management but struggled with political polarization post-2000. Another option might be a directorate system, where decisions are made by a small, rotating committee of states (as proposed by Russia in the past to limit NATO/US influence).

It seems likely that some form of hybrid or tiered decision-making model would be required, combining elements of consensus, majority voting and specialized bodies. For core principles and commitments (e.g., territorial integrity, human rights) pure consensus would be desirable to preserve their foundational nature and ensure that they remain non-negotiable, whereas operational decisions (e.g., deploying monitors, approving budgets) could use qualified majority voting (e.g., 2/3 majority of participants and major powers). An independent arbitration body (modelled on the OSCE's Conflict Prevention Centre) could rule on ambiguities. For critical issues (e.g., arms control treaties, invasion responses) a consensus among a group of 'security guarantors' (e.g., NATO, EU, Russia) could be required, with other states having advisory roles. Finally, regional sub committees (e.g., European, Euro-Asian, Americas) could also be established to resolve issues before plenary sessions, with outcomes requiring consensus within the subgroup.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the Annex provides a proposed outline framework for a new Helsinki Final Act, structured into 'baskets' (as in the original 1975 Accords), with key components designed to bridge the divide.

Addressing the root cause(s) and conditions for success

For a new Helsinki Final Act to help bridge differences between Russia and NATO it is necessary to move beyond the mechanism (the Act itself) and focus on the fundamental problem and the conditions for success. The fundamental nature of the current Russia-NATO divide is that it is a combination of a security dilemma (mutual fears driving arms

races and confrontation), a clash of core values (democracy vs. autocracy, sovereignty vs. spheres of influence), a conflict over the European security architecture (NATO expansion vs. Russian demands for exclusion zones) and a consequence of specific actions (e.g., Ukraine invasion, NATO's post-Cold War evolution). The key question, therefore, is whether a single diplomatic framework (like a new Helsinki Act) can effectively address all these intertwined dimensions simultaneously, or is it fundamentally mismatched to the core problems?

The root of the current impasse is that NATO and Russia interpret the principle of 'security indivisibility' in fundamentally different ways. Hence, any viable new arrangement would have to find some way to reconcile that, or risk being rendered ineffective at the first dispute or crisis. This might necessitate a dedicated, institutionalized body under the new Helsinki process or as a precursor to it. Some form of 'Security Indivisibility Dialogue' forum involving NATO, Russia and key European states (EU, OSCE) could force both sides to articulate their red lines and principles, identify shared interests (e.g., counterterrorism, cyber security) and to build collaboration and create transparency measures to reduce misperceptions (e.g., joint analysis of military exercises). The NATO-Russia Council (1997–2014) attempted this but collapsed after the Crimea crisis. A new iteration could include third-party mediators (e.g., Austria and Switzerland) to facilitate if direct talks stall. Issue-specific working groups could focus on low-hanging fruit to build confidence. These might include a "No Surprise Deployments" agreement for equipment near shared borders, jointly defined norms for state behaviour in cyber warfare and to prevent militarization of space, and regional flashpoint mechanisms for the Black Sea and Baltic states.

Track 1.5 or public dialogues involving non-official experts could also be applied to test some of these ideas before they enter formal negotiations. This could either take the form of academic or think tank partnerships or a public commission: a 'Helsinki II Council' of historians, diplomats and civil society figures to (a) draft a joint *Definition Paper* on "indivisible security"; (b) identify concrete *stress-points*—force deployments, missile defence, exercises, enlargement, etc; and propose risk-reduction packages for each stress-point.

Such an informal dialogue architecture might realistically move the two interpretations toward a workable middle ground. Success, however, would probably require asymmetric concessions (e.g., NATO easing rhetoric on expansion in exchange for Russian troops withdrawing from Georgia/Moldova) and **i**nstitutionalizing routine engagement to prevent regression. The real challenge is not to agree on a slogan—both sides already endorse 'indivisible security' in theory—but to operationalise it so that NATO does not feel it is signing away the sovereign right of states to choose alliances, and Russia does not feel it's vital regional interests can be overridden by a 32-member bloc.

V. Conclusions

A new Helsinki Final Act would need to be more than a symbolic gesture—it would have to address the structural causes of mistrust between NATO and Russia. To do this it would need to be far more comprehensive and adaptive than its predecessor, reflecting the realities of 21st-century security. Its success would depend on genuine political will, a willingness to compromise, and robust mechanisms for implementation and verification. Above all, it would need to reaffirm the principle that security in Europe is indivisible and that the interests of all states—large and small—must be respected.

By focusing on security, economic cooperation, the human dimension, conflict prevention and institutional reform, a new Helsinki Final Act could create a foundation for a more stable and cooperative European order. While the path to such an agreement is fraught with challenges, the alternative—continued confrontation—poses a far greater risk to global peace. The original Helsinki Accords demonstrated that even in the height of the Cold War, dialogue and mutual recognition could reduce the risk of catastrophe. A modern version could do the same in an era of renewed great-power rivalry.

Finally, a new Helsinki process may also need to revisit ideas of a Europe with a revised, perhaps reduced, role for NATO. The Helsinki Final Act did not lead to any alteration in the role of NATO as the primary vehicle for military security cooperation between West European states and their North American allies. Although several prominent European politicians in the immediate post-Cold War period expressed the hope that eventually both NATO and the Warsaw Pact would be superseded by a pan-European security organisation modelled on the CSCE/OSCE, this never materialised. While the Warsaw Pact dissolved, NATO under US leadership embarked on an unrelenting process of change, adaptation and expansion eastwards—from 16 member states in 1994 to 32 in 2024. The OSCE was effectively sidelined. In the light of current and likely future American indifference to European interests, however, a reconsideration of NATO as the principal institution for European security may be a timely endeavour.

Annex: Possible Baskets for a New Helsinki Act

BASKET ONE: Modernised security - military stability and non-aggression

- **Reaffirmation of borders and non-use of force:** Clear, unambiguous commitment to the inviolability of borders and peaceful resolution of disputes.
- **Respect for strategic interests:** Recognize that NATO and Russia have distinct security priorities (e.g., NATO's expansion vs. Russia's "near abroad") and commit to avoiding actions that threaten the other's core interests. Allow countries in the 'grey zone' (e.g., Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine) to choose nonalignment or neutrality without coercion, while guaranteeing their sovereignty.
- **Mutual security assurances:** Mechanisms to address the security concerns of both NATO and Russia, possibly including limits on force deployments, transparency measures, and reciprocal restraint in military exercises near borders.
- **Crisis prevention and management protocols:** Clear procedures for responding to emergencies, such as military incidents or cyberattacks, including hotlines, incident prevention agreements, joint exercises, rapid response teams and regular military-to-military contacts to reduce the risk of accidental escalation.
- **Early warning systems**: New frameworks for joint monitoring or peacekeeping of potential flashpoints (e.g., border disputes, ethnic tensions) with regular dialogue between NATO and Russian officials.
- **Civilian protection**: Commitments to safeguard civilians in conflict zones, including humanitarian access and the prohibition of attacks on hospitals, schools and other protected sites.
- **Arms control and confidence-building:** Revitalised arms control agreements (conventional and nuclear), transparency in military activities, and new confidence-building measures adapted to modern threats. A renewed focus on reducing nuclear arsenals, limiting the deployment of advanced weapons systems (e.g., hypersonic missiles) and preventing the militarization of space. Agreements to reduce military presence in contested regions and establish buffer zones.
- **Norms and confidence-building in cyberspace:** Agreements on non-interference in critical infrastructure, mutual commitments to protect digital sovereignty, transparency in cyber operations and rapid communication channels for cyber incidents.
- **Hybrid warfare:** Mechanisms to identify, attribute and respond to hybrid threats (e.g., election interference, economic coercion).
- **Non-proliferation and counterterrorism:** Cooperation on WMD non-proliferation, counterterrorism and transnational crime.

BASKET TWO: Interdependence and resilience - Economic, energy and environmental cooperation

- **Energy security and cooperation:** Frameworks for stable, transparent and mutually beneficial energy trade, with mechanisms to prevent the use of energy as a political weapon.
- **Infrastructure and connectivity:** Joint projects to improve cross-border infrastructure, digital connectivity and resilience against cyber and hybrid threats. Infrastructure projects that benefit 'both sides' would address Russia's reliance on energy exports and NATO's dependence on Russian energy.
- **Climate and environmental security:** Cooperative efforts to address climate change, environmental degradation and disaster response.
- **Trade and investment**: Frameworks for fair trade, intellectual property protection and investment in sectors like technology, agriculture and healthcare. Creation of a new 'European Economic Stability

Fund' to support post-conflict reconstruction (not least in Ukraine) and development in regions affected by instability.

- **Sanctions and economic leverage**: A clause to limit the use of economic coercion (e.g., sanctions) as a tool of political pressure, with mechanisms for dispute resolution.

BASKET THREE: Human dimension 2.0 - human rights, civil society and democratic values

- **Mutual respect for sovereignty and political systems:** Acknowledge the diversity of political models (democratic, authoritarian, hybrid) and commit to non-interference in internal affairs. This would counter Russia's narrative of Western hypocrisy and 'colour revolutions'.
- **Human rights and rule of law as shared goals:** Update commitments to human rights, freedom of expression and the rule of law, with mechanisms for dialogue and monitoring that are less confrontational but still meaningful. Emphasise universal principles (e.g., freedom of expression, rule of law) while allowing flexibility for regional interpretations. This could include joint initiatives to combat corruption, protect journalists and ensure fair elections.
- **Civil society engagement:** Support for cross-border civil society initiatives, academic exchanges and people-to-people contacts on issues like education, media and environmental protection to rebuild trust at the societal level.
- **Information integrity:** Joint efforts to combat disinformation, promote media literacy, and establish norms for responsible state behaviour in the information space.
- **Dispute resolution mechanisms:** Establish an independent, neutral body to mediate conflicts over human rights claims, avoiding politicization by either side.

BASKET FOUR: Reforming regional governance and trust-building

- **Reforming the OSCE**: Transform it into a more inclusive, neutral body with expanded roles in conflict prevention, election monitoring and human rights.
- **New multilateral frameworks**: Create a new 'European Security Council' involving NATO, Russia and other regional actors, and rotating representation by small and medium states, to address security challenges collectively.
- **Transparency and accountability**: Establish independent oversight bodies to monitor compliance with the new Accords, ensuring accountability for violations.
- **Cultural and educational exchange**: Expand programmes for student, academic and cultural exchanges to foster mutual understanding and counter misinformation.

Rethink Europe Discussion Papers

Recent actions and rhetoric from the United States, particularly under the current administration, have led to significant concerns about its reliability as a security, intelligence and trading partner. The current chaotic moment is an opportunity to chart a new rules-based path either without Washington or within a recalibrated security relationship. NATO as the main basis of European defence and security also looks increasingly precarious. This series of discussion papers undertakes an urgent **rethink** in three interlinked policy areas:

- Europe's relationship to the USA and the future of NATO;
- Ending the Russia-Ukraine war and future relations with Moscow; and
- The scope and nature of future European security norms and structures.

Promoting a more open, transparent and accountable North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NATO Watch
www.natowatch.org