The OSCE and the Netherlands’ Chairmanship
High Expectations, Realistic Goals

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On December 1-2, 2003, the Ministerial Council of the 55 participating states of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) took place in Maastricht – the first meeting of this kind on Dutch soil. The Chairman of the Ministerial Council was Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, performing his last act as Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. Although it had already been announced in September 2003 that De Hoop Scheffer would lead NATO as of January 1, 2004 (and his successor at the Netherlands’ Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague was named soon afterwards), the acting Minister preferred to stay on as Chairman of the OSCE until after the meeting in Maastricht. By taking this line of action, the Minister and the Dutch government underlined the importance that they attach to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in general and to the Netherlands’ Chairmanship in particular.

The Ministerial Council in Maastricht not only marked the end of the Netherlands’ Chairmanship, but it was also a good opportunity to place the OSCE and its activities in the national and international limelight. The OSCE is indeed a relatively unknown organization. Nevertheless it is the world’s biggest regional security organization. With 55 member states located in the Northern Hemisphere, the OSCE reaches from Vancouver in Canada to Vladivostok in Russia. Within this region the OSCE engages in political and military issues, economic and environmental cooperation, as well as questions relating to human rights, democratization, and the development of the rule of law. This broad approach is based on the idea of comprehensive security: the notion that not only or primarily politico-military questions are of relevance for the maintenance of peace and stability, but that the protection and promotion of human rights and economic and environmental issues should also be an integral part of any international security policy. The OSCE underlines the interdependence of the various security dimensions, and states that security is in that respect indivisible. This broad notion of the indivisibility of the various security dimensions also found its way into the European Union’s new security strategy.

The OSCE can look back at an almost 30-year history as a forum for dialogue between the West and (former communist) East. The first contours of a permanent European security organization – the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) – took shape at the beginning of the 1970s and were translated in 1975 into the Helsinki Final Act. In this document the then 35 participating states agreed “[m]otivated by the political will, in the interest of peoples, to improve and intensify their relations and to contribute in Europe to peace, security, justice and cooperation as well as to rapprochement among themselves and with the other states of the world.”

With this goal in mind the participating states were able, especially after the end of the Cold War and the fall of the communist regimes, to come to more specific and concrete measures in order to enhance mutual cooperation and common security. At the beginning of the 1990s it was decided to start a careful institutionalization of the CSCE: a gradual transition from a series of conferences to a small organization with permanent institutions. A small Secretariat was set up, as well as a Conflict Prevention Center tasked with confidence- and security-building measures. The Organization for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) promotes democratization and humanitarian and human rights’ issues. During the following years, a number of new and additional institutions were created, such as the Parliamentary Assembly, a yearly meeting of national parliamentarians (during summer 2003 its meeting took place in Rotterdam, under the Netherlands’ Chairmanship), the Forum for Security
Cooperation, the Economic Forum, the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), the Secretary-General, and the Chairman-in-Office (CiO).¹

During 2003 the Netherlands acted as Chairman-in-Office, and the main burden of this task rested on the shoulders of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, De Hoop Scheffer. In many respects the Chairmanship is at the center of the Organization. The CiO is responsible for the performance and coordination of the Organization’s activities. This means the coordination of the various OSCE institutions’ activities, external representation of the Organization, frequent visits to participating states, and initiating and control of conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict peace-building – the core business of the Organization.

Starting Point

The Netherlands’ Chairmanship took place during a difficult time for the OSCE. Some critics maintained that the OSCE was in clear crisis at the beginning of the twenty-first century, or at least going through a period of stagnation and doubt, and that it might sink into obscurity. The Organization was confronted with various problems and challenges.

One of the main problems is that the OSCE, despite its name, still lacks an organizational structure. It is foremost a community of shared values and norms, common principles and starting points. It only has a small central organization, but quite a large number of relatively independent instruments, such as the field missions. More often than not the OSCE is seen as a conference that has been stuck somewhere along the road of transition to an organization. Given this state of affairs, the OSCE also lacks coherence and consistency. Every year a new Chairman is appointed and new initiatives are taken, but the course followed is to a great degree dependent on the CiO’s personal involvement. This is also true for the various other instruments (for example, the High Commissioner on National Minorities, and the Representative on Freedom of the Media), including the many field missions.

A second problem is the OSCE’s changing position within the international security architecture. During the 1970s and 1980s the OSCE was the obvious forum for dialogue between “West” and “East.” More than ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, however, the OSCE is no longer the obvious and only meeting place. Both NATO and the European Union have moved eastwards and have taken on responsibilities that were traditionally the domain of the OSCE. In the past the OSCE was the main forum for Russia to maintain relations with the West. Now that mutual relations have improved considerably (see, for instance, the NATO-Russia Council and the “special relationship” with the European Union), the OSCE seems less important.

Not only has the OSCE’s position within the international framework been changed, but its position is also less clear given the fact that the major actors – the United States, the Russian Federation and the European Union – seem to have no clear-cut ideas on the Organization’s future. Especially since the Bush administration took over, the United States has given low priority to multilateral arrangements and agreements. Washington is only willing to invest in multilateralism if it is clearly beneficial to its own national policy goals. Russia is clearly not satisfied with the way in which the Organization is run. The Russians rightly point to the fact that the OSCE’s activities are almost exclusively directed at the former communist part of the OSCE region. According to Russia, a real balance between the different dimensions of security and cooperation is lacking: too much attention is being paid to the human dimension. Russia also wants to reorganize the OSCE’s working procedures: the role of the Permanent Council as the main steering committee should be enhanced and the heads of the various field missions should be less independent.² The European Union’s role within the OSCE is also far from clear. Although EU (candidate) members make up
nearly half of the OSCE’s participating states, they form no real and strong group within the Organization. On the one hand, consensus on some of the most important issues on the agenda is missing; on the other hand, there is no clear-cut, shared view on the OSCE’s role and position given the gradual development of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) of the European Union. Larger member states of the European Union in particular have refrained from taking initiatives in this field.

Priorities and Policy Goals

In light of the above-mentioned “challenges,” it was clear from the beginning that the Netherlands’ Chairmanship would not be an easy task. Even before the Chairmanship was officially awarded to the Netherlands, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs Van Aartsen asked the Netherlands’ Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) for advice. In its advisory report, presented in June 2002, the AIV noticed that the Chairmanship has few opportunities to prioritize issues of its own by placing “national accents.” Reacting to unexpected and unpredictable international developments and crises, and reaching consensus on issues and policies within a group of 55 participating states, is already a rich and meaningful agenda in itself. Management of the many OSCE field missions also demands the Chairmanship’s full and constant attention. In addition, as Chairman of the Organization, the Netherlands should see to it that the OSCE continues to focus its activities on what is generally regarded as its core business: conflict prevention, conflict management, and the reconstruction of societies in transition (the transition from war to peace and/or the transition from non-democratic one-party states to plural democracies). Key words in this respect are: observation and, where necessary, organization of elections, promotion of respect for human rights, supporting the rule of law, and (further) reduction of armament levels in conflict areas. Concentration on this core business of the Organization has the additional benefit that some tasks and activities that are less essential to the Organization can be thrust aside, especially when these tasks and activities can be taken over by organizations that are better equipped to deal with them. Although the management of “current affairs” would be the main task, the AIV was of the opinion that, as Chairman-in-Office, the Netherlands should nevertheless put forward some clear priorities.

In September 2002, as part of the presentation of the yearly budget of the Netherlands’ Ministry of Foreign Affairs for 2003, Minister De Hoop Scheffer named his three main priorities for the Netherlands’ Chairmanship, accompanied by a list of results that were to be achieved.

First, the coming Chairman stressed the necessity to strengthen the organizational-structural aspects of the OSCE, which could be separated into: a) geographical redistribution and a more balanced set of tasks for the missions and other field activities (partly in response to the criticism, mainly from Russia, of the OSCE’s one-sided attention; b) improvement of the political management of the OSCE’s field missions; and c) improvement in coordination of the different OSCE institutions’ activities. These last two goals could partly be read as a concession to the (again Russian) criticism that the OSCE’s representatives in the field (too) often issue statements that are not necessarily the formal opinion of the OSCE, authorized by the Permanent Council.

A second priority of the Netherlands’ Chairmanship was the emphasis on crisis management and conflict prevention. Results that were to be achieved in these areas are: 1) an active involvement in (finding solutions for) long-lasting conflicts (so-called “frozen conflicts”), with a tentative priority for the case of Moldova; 2) strengthening the Dutch diplomatic presence in Central Asia (a more or less derived target, since not directly related to the OSCE Chairmanship); and 3) diminishing the size and the set of tasks of the OSCE’s missions in the Balkans to the benefit of a stronger presence in the Caucasus region and in Central Asia.
With regard to the first target, it was rightly noticed that, given the location of the frozen conflicts in the “near abroad” of the Russian Federation, establishing intensive contacts with Moscow would be necessary, if not a precondition for any success in contributing to a solution to these conflicts.

The third priority was to achieve a more balanced policy for the Organization. The targets were: a) a more balanced relationship between the politico-military dimension and the economic and human dimensions of the OSCE; without b) a weakening of commitment to human rights’ issues and the development of the rule of law; and c) a firm handling of so-called trafficking problems. The latter theme – especially the illegal trade in human beings, weapons and drugs – would be the “red line” that runs through successive Dutch Chairmanships of the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the European Union respectively.

High Expectations

On the eve of the Chairmanship, the expectations of the Netherlands’ CiO were high, both at home and abroad. In an interview published on the OSCE’s website, the Minister of Foreign Affairs acknowledged the existence of these expectations by responding to a question about Dutch priorities for 2003: “The Netherlands has high ambitions,” adding that “the field experience that the OSCE can provide, the backing of 55 participating states and the Netherlands’ determination to provide the tools and political backing required should put the OSCE in a position to make a genuine difference.”

The Netherlands was and is regarded as a prominent participant in the OSCE, as a country that could give new impetus to the Organization’s development and functioning. It has, after all, been a country that from the outset has been closely involved with the Conference on, and later Organization for, Security and Cooperation in Europe. Besides its involvement in the past, the fact that the Netherlands as a relatively large “small country” is capable and willing to invest the necessary diplomatic and financial means further raised the expectations.

In order to make the Chairmanship a success, the Netherlands’ Ministry of Foreign Affairs established a special Task Force, headed by an experienced diplomat, the former head of OSCE missions in Kosovo and Albania, Ambassador Daan Everts. An additional budget of about 13 million euros was created, an amount that is larger than that of previous Chairmanships and (as can be expected) the coming Bulgarian and Slovenian Chairmanships. Based on these financial means, the Netherlands would be able to conduct more activities and support more processes, which could give new impetus to the OSCE. At the onset of his Chairmanship, De Hoop Scheffer formulated matters as follows: “If the Netherlands, with its financial and human efforts, is not able to make the Chairmanship a success, then it would be very difficult for others to achieve that goal.” Besides allotting the necessary means, the Netherlands intensified consultations with the office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities (made relatively easy by the fact that his office is also located in The Hague, close to the Netherlands’ Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and commissioned a diplomat at the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in Warsaw. The Netherlands also extended and strengthened consultations with “partner organizations,” especially the European Union and the Council of Europe.

Activities and Decisions

In order to determine to what extent the Netherlands’ Chairmanship can be regarded as a success, we look primarily at the initiatives and activities employed, as well as the decisions taken by the Organization in 2003. However, as it is impossible to focus on the full OSCE agenda for the year 2003 and all the gatherings and activities in which the Netherlands’ Chairmanship played a role, we only refer to the initiatives and activities related to the priorities and targets of the Chairmanship mentioned above.
Given the priorities and targets related to the role, position and perceptions of the Russian Federation, it comes as no surprise that De Hoop Scheffer already paid a visit to Moscow at the beginning of 2003. Moreover, throughout his Chairmanship, the Dutch Minister often contacted his Russian counterpart. Unfortunately, even before his first visit, the new Chairman-in-Office had already been confronted with new Russian assertiveness in response to Russian discontent about the OSCE’s functioning. As a result of Russian obstruction, it proved impossible to extend the mandate of the OSCE’s Assistance Group to Chechnya. Despite the closing of the OSCE’s mission in this troubled region, the Chairmanship at least managed to continue the dialogue with Russia on this issue, aiming at reinstating some form of OSCE presence in the region in the future. In his contacts with the Russian Foreign Minister, the CiO also continuously underlined the need to live up to OSCE’s principles and commitments.

With regard to “frozen conflicts,” De Hoop Scheffer put a lot of effort into reaching a breakthrough in the case of Moldova (and the related issues of withdrawing remaining Russian troops and weaponry, and a new constitutional framework for Moldova). The experienced former Ambassador Adriaan Jacobovits de Szeged was appointed Personal Representative of the CiO. Early in April 2003, De Hoop Scheffer visited Moldova. Partly as a result of this visit, a first meeting took place of a commission in which the various conflicting parties were represented. This commission was expected to draft a new constitution on the basis of which the breakaway region of Transdniestria could be reintegrated in a federal Moldova. Noticeable progress was made during 2003, even resulting in tentative plans for the deployment of a multilateral peace force – composed of troops from the European Union, Russia and other countries – under an OSCE mandate. In early November 2003, when a breakthrough in this conflict seemed at hand, De Hoop Scheffer visited Moldova again. However, after his departure and with only days remaining until the OSCE’s Ministerial Council at Maastricht, the Russians severely embarrassed the Netherlands’ Chairmanship, the United States and the European Union. On November 17, 2003 the Moldavian President Vladimir Voronin and the Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that they had made a separate deal, without involving the OSCE or its CiO. In response, De Hoop Scheffer informed President Voronin that several participating states could not agree to the so-called Kozak Memorandum (named after Putin’s First Deputy Chief of Staff who brokered the contested deal) and had expressed serious reservations regarding some key provisions, such as the lack of clarity on the proposed division of powers between the central and regional authorities, Transdniestria’s de facto veto power until at least 2015, and the absence of any satisfactory multinational guarantee system. Nevertheless, De Hoop Scheffer assured Voronin that the OSCE continued to be prepared to offer assistance in reaching a solution to the conflict.

Paying attention to a second troubled region within the OSCE’s area, Central Asia, was initially hampered by developments related to Iraq. A visit by the Chairman-in-Office planned for mid-February 2003 was cancelled at the last moment. A few weeks later De Hoop Scheffer traveled to one of the region’s republics, Turkmenistan. In July 2003 he visited the four other former Soviet republics in Central Asia. With these visits he underlined Dutch interest in developments in this region, including worries over the human rights’ situation, the rule of law and slow progress with regard to democratization. The CiO once more underlined the need to live up to OSCE commitments.

The Netherlands’ priority on trafficking found its way onto the OSCE’s agenda. The two preparatory meetings of the yearly Economic Forum in Prague in May 2003 were dedicated to this theme. Partly as a result of these meetings, a substantial OSCE action plan against trafficking was adopted on July 24 2003. With regard to the organizational-structural reform of the Organization, the Netherlands can claim two decisions of the Permanent Council on new financial and budgetary processes that will improve transparency and the possibility to
control these processes.\textsuperscript{11} A Dutch initiative on the management of human resources within the Organization was also accepted. According to the new procedures, not only the Chairman-in-Office but a larger group of participating states can appoint new positions.

**Ministerial Council in Maastricht**

What should have been the climax of the Netherlands’ Chairmanship, the Ministerial Council in Maastricht on December 1-2, 2003 turned out to be somewhat of a disappointment. No agreement could be reached on a final document.

Quite positive, however, were the many decisions taken. The Council approved, \textit{inter alia}, draft decisions on tolerance and non-discrimination, the Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area, the Mandate of a Mechanism for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, and the related Action Plan. Furthermore, the OSCE’s Foreign Ministers adopted the draft Travel Document on Security and the draft OSCE Strategy to Address Threats to Security and Stability in the Twenty-First Century. The OSCE states in this Strategy that it will pay more attention to combating terrorism and organized crime. The Council also decided that Belgium will be Chairman in the year 2006. The OSCE’s pledge of immediate financial assistance for the upcoming elections in Georgia (7 million euros) can also be regarded as a positive outcome of the meeting. The same holds for the attendance at the meeting of many Foreign Ministers – among them Colin Powell, Igor Ivanov and Joschka Fischer – giving additional weight to the Organization and to decisions taken by the Ministerial Council.

A clear disappointment was the uncooperative, at times outright negative, attitude of the Russian delegation. The Russians were not willing to agree on a draft text that expressed the continuous OSCE support to the independence and territorial integrity of Moldova and Georgia, and that included a repeated call for the withdrawal of Russian troops from these countries. This attitude not only prevented the adoption of a final declaration, but also showed that the Netherlands’ Chairmanship’s investment in good relations with Moscow did not pay off at all.

**Conclusion**

Despite the disappointment of “Maastricht” and Russia’s double crossing with regard to the Chairmanship’s initiatives (and others’) on Moldova, the Netherlands can look back at a relatively successful OSCE Chairmanship-in-Office. Unlike some of its predecessors, the Netherlands did not have to deal with major international crises that demanded all of the attention of the Organization and its Chairman. Fortunately, the Organization was not confronted with international divisions of the kind that the United Nations, NATO and the European Union faced as a result of the war in Iraq, in which many OSCE participating states were involved, either directly or indirectly. Moreover, the Netherlands was not confronted with a change of Minister of Foreign Affairs that could have jeopardized the continuity of the Chairmanship.

The OSCE hardly made headlines in 2003, but this was never expected. Expectations at the eve of the Netherlands’ Chairmanship were high as far as other issues were concerned. They might have been a little too high. The priorities and targets of the Chairmanship were more realistic, and most were achieved. Despite the embarrassment in November 2003 and despite the lack of a “solution,” progress was nevertheless made with regard to the frozen conflict in Moldova. After more than a decade of stagnation, this case still looks more hopeful now than one year ago.

Although the decision-making procedures and organizational structure of the OSCE have not been altered radically, one can speak of substantial improvements in the management of
human resources and finances as a result of the Dutch Chairmanship’s efforts. The exchange of information and consultations – both among OSCE institutions and between the Organization and its “partner organizations” – have been improved and intensified during 2003. In addition, the Netherlands’ Chairman-in-Office has managed to put a number of issues on the OSCE’s agenda that are relevant to the OSCE areas as a whole. In particular, the problem of trafficking (especially the illegal trade in human beings) proved to be a very appealing theme as a truly pan-European problem. This theme embodies the broad spectrum of OSCE activities within the politico-military, economic, and human dimensions. Given the fact that the Netherlands has also made this theme central to the upcoming Chairmanships of the Council of Europe and the European Union, it is likely that international attention on problems related to trafficking will stay on the agenda after 2003.

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Notes
7. Max van der Stoel, former High Commissioner on National Minorities, at a seminar on the agenda of the Netherlands’ Chairmanship, noticed that within the OSCE there was eagerness to see the Netherlands’ Chairmanship lead the organization. See the report of the seminar organized by the Netherlands Helsinki Committee, De agenda van het Nederlands voorzitterschap van de OVSE, The Hague, April 22 2002, www.nhc.nl/reportroundtable22042002.
9. For a more complete overview of the agenda, see www.osce.org/cio/netherlands/news/.