

A man wearing a blue OSCE winter jacket and a white hood with the OSCE logo. He has a serious expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

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Building Trust and Confidence in International Security

A Conversation with OSCE Secretary General Thomas Greminger

Interviewed by Ryan Rogers

Fletcher Security Review: This July will mark a year into your first three-year term as Secretary General. What is the current state of the OSCE’s efforts at a time many have characterized as “the return of geopolitics”? Where have you been successful and what are you continuing to focus on moving into the second year of your term this summer?

Secretary General Greminger: The security environment is marked by unpredictability—by a historic low in trust and confidence among the key security stakeholders in Euro-Atlantic security. At the same we face complex global challenges like violent extremism, terrorism, cyber threats, irregular migration, etc. For us, the crisis in and around Ukraine is still our main priority and at the top of our agenda.

We are doing a good job in managing the conflict and preventing further escalation but, unfortunately, we are

very much struggling when it comes to resolving the conflict. I think there is a political impasse in implementing the Minsk Agreements, but I think what we are doing is positioning the OSCE as the unique platform for inclusive dialogue—this is our comparative advantage—and wherever possible, joint action. We are inviting our participating States to identify a unifying agenda where specific interests of the participating States converge. There are many areas where we do see a convergence of interests. Cybersecurity, for instance, is such an area, as well as preventing violent extremism and combatting trafficking of all sorts, to name a few.

I believe participating States should try to identify areas within the political-military sphere where we could take concrete measures. The aim of the Structured Dialogue, the flagship dialogue process of the OSCE that participating States launched last year, aims exactly at that. It gives participating States an informal platform



Leaders of Belarus, Russia, Germany, France, and Ukraine at the 11–12 February summit in Minsk (The Russian Presidential Press and Information Office / CC BY 4.0)



OSCE SMM monitoring the movement of heavy weaponry in eastern Ukraine (OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine / CC BY 4.0)

to exchange ideas on threat perceptions with an aim to diffuse tensions and rebuild some trust and confidence. The idea is to eventually identify very concrete measures to reduce military risk and to reinvigorate confidence- and security-building measures. The dialogue platform, as such, has been successfully launched. I think it is very much appreciated by the participating States, but it still has to produce concrete outcomes.

FSR: You just mentioned the political impasse regarding the Ukraine situation as well as the concept of the Structured Dialogue. You have also recently written an op-ed in the Russian newspaper *Kommersant* at the end of 2017 in which you identified “trust as the glue that holds international relations together.” How is the OSCE promoting trust among participating States and is progress being made to that end?

SG: We have to find spaces where we talk to each other, where we listen to each other, and where we try to understand each other. These spaces will potentially allow us to identify areas of converging interests where we could then take joint action and rebuild some trust and confidence. This is of course against the backdrop of current tensions and it is not a process that will yield re-

sults overnight. It will take time to rebuild the trust and confidence that have been lost. The Structured Dialogue is an interesting platform to do that. Also, the work that the OSCE does on cyber security is extremely important and very topical. The OSCE is the only regional organization which has managed to produce two sets of confidence-building measures (CBMs) on cyber security and I think that it is an area where we should continue to focus.

I would also acknowledge that rebuilding trust ultimately depends on resolving some of the conflicts. The conflict in Ukraine is absolutely fundamental. If you want to truly rebuild trust, you need progress in Ukraine. We also need to come back to respecting the principles and commitments that participating States of the OSCE have committed to and eventually get back to a rule-based security order in the Euro-Atlantic area.

FSR: Perhaps we could talk trust and the role of CBMs in the realm of cyber security more specifically. It seems like it was a major focus of both the German and Austrian OSCE Chairmanships over the past two years and one of the focuses of the Italian Chairmanship this year. How does the OSCE plan to continue to facilitate

progress between participating States in regard to these matters?

SG: First of all, I would want to underscore that the OSCE is at the vanguard among international organizations in its efforts to achieve practical accomplishments towards promoting cyber stability between states. I have referred to the two sets of cyber CBMs, a total of 16, whose main objective is to reduce the risk of conflict associated with the use of cyber capabilities by states. It is about facilitating the exchange of information among national points of contact and supporting the facilitation of secure and reliable communication channels between states to prevent and reduce the risks of misperception, escalation, and conflict. That is the very purpose of these CBMs.

Practically, it is about creating hotlines between states in the event of a major crisis. It is about making the OSCE communications network, which was established for communication about various military treaties and agreements, capable of serving an important purpose regarding cyber security between states. The challenge right now is to make these effective crisis communication mechanisms operational. It is also about helping participating States develop their own capacities to fight cyber threats. That is particularly relevant and the demand is especially high for states in the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia. These are the challenges, but again I think that the OSCE offers an excellent platform that should really be used systematically in the future to address these very topical

challenges.

FSR: You have recently returned from the Munich Security Conference 2018. What were your impressions?

SG: Sobering. I was not surprised, but I was quite taken aback by the confrontational mood. The main emphasis of the discussions was on deterrence and defense and, then again, on deterrence and defense. My attempt was to bring a call for dialogue to Munich. The unique opportunity of Munich is that you have an incredible presence of key security stakeholders there, so I had quite a number of bilateral meetings and I also had a side event where I conveyed this message. I conveyed the things we have been talking about: the need for dialogue that the OSCE offers - Structure Dialogue; this call for a unifying agenda on areas of converging interests. This is very important and I brought these messages to Munich, but it was clearly not the mainstream. The mainstream in Munich was quite confrontational with the main emphasis on deterrence.

FSR: Sir, thank you for your time. It has been a pleasure to have this discussion.

OSCE Secretary General Thomas Greminger

Ambassador Thomas Greminger was appointed Secretary General of the OSCE on 18 July 2017 for a three-year term. Ambassador Greminger joined the diplomatic service of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) in 1990 and has held numerous senior management positions during his career. Prior to his appointment as OSCE Secretary General, he was Deputy Director General of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, overseeing an annual budget of USD 730 million and 900 staff in Bern and abroad. From 2010 to 2015, Greminger was the Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the OSCE, serving as Chair of the Permanent Council during Switzerland's 2014 OSCE Chairmanship. Prior to his assignment at the Permanent Delegation of Switzerland to the OSCE, Greminger was Head of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs's Human Security Division, Switzerland's competence centre for peace, human rights, and humanitarian and migration policy. Thomas Greminger holds a PhD in history from the University of Zurich and the rank of Lieutenant Colonel (General Staff) in the Swiss Armed Forces. He has authored a number of publications on military history, conflict management, peacekeeping, development and human rights. His mother tongue is German; he speaks fluent English and French, and has a working knowledge of Portuguese. In 2012, he was awarded the OSCE white ribbon for his long-standing support for gender equality.