

The OSCE Asian Partnership: Developments and Thematic Priorities

by Marietta S. König and Liliya Buhela



ABSTRACT

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) enjoys a special relationship with five Asian and six Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation. They are combined in two separate groups, which steadily diverged from each other with time, even though still loosely connected through overlapping thematic priorities oriented towards the overall OSCE agenda. The OSCE Asian Partnership continuously expanded and today includes a heterogeneous but well-functioning group of states consisting of Afghanistan, Australia, Japan, Republic of Korea, and Thailand. Acknowledging the growing interconnectedness between the OSCE and its Partner regions, the OSCE Asian Partnership takes a demand-driven approach placing a strong emphasis on exchanging best practices and valuable experiences. Many of the events held within the OSCE Asian Partnership framework have sought to encompass all three dimensions of security. In addition, cooperation at the operational level has been strengthened significantly through a variety of project activities involving the Partners in the OSCE's programmatic activities. Former Asian Partner Mongolia set a unique precedent when performing the necessary steps for becoming the 57th OSCE participating State in 2012. Yet, there is still sufficient potential also for increased cooperation within the Asian Partnership framework aimed at a broadened thematic scope, which includes newly emerging topics relevant to the OSCE's comprehensive concept of security.

OSCE | Asia | Mediterranean

keywords

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Introduction

In 2020, the OSCE Asian Partnership for Co-operation celebrated an important milestone – its 25th anniversary. It was also the first year of the OSCE Asian Partners for Co-operation Group (APCG) following the 2019 Bratislava Ministerial Council decision to rename it from the Contact Group with Asian Partners for Co-operation.¹ The name change, while reaffirming the status of the Group as an informal subsidiary body of the Permanent Council as defined in the 2006 Rules of Procedure of the OSCE,² was considered a relevant step toward more substantial engagement based on meaningful political dialogue and practical cooperation. The clear mandate for this step, however, was provided only one year later through the 2020 Tirana Ministerial Declaration on Co-operation with the OSCE Asian Partners, which reiterated high-level political support for the Partnership declared five years earlier through the 2014 Basel Ministerial Council Declaration – the first OSCE document dedicated exclusively to the OSCE Asian Partnership.³

¹ OSCE Ministerial Council, *Decision No.2, Renaming the Contact Group with the Asian Partners for Co-operation and the Contact Group with the Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation* (MC.DEC/2/19), 6 December 2019, <https://www.osce.org/node/441515>.

² OSCE Ministerial Council, *OSCE Rules of Procedure* (MC.DOC/1/06), 1 November 2006, <https://www.osce.org/node/22777>.

³ OSCE Ministerial Council, *Ministerial Declaration on Co-operation with the Asian Partners* (MC.DOC/10/14), 5 December 2014, <https://www.osce.org/node/130566>.

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This paper was prepared in the context of the New-Med Research Network, a project run by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI), the OSCE Secretariat in Vienna and the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation. Views expressed are the author's alone.

Yet it was decades earlier that the OSCE, at the time still the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), had started to attract the attention of several Asian states. Japan was the first Asian country to be invited to a CSCE meeting, namely the 1992 CSCE Summit in Helsinki, and the first to establish special relations with the CSCE, followed by the Republic of Korea in 1994. First used during the 1995 Budapest Ministerial Council, the term “Partners for Co-operation” referred then only to Japan and the Republic of Korea.⁴ The new framework allowed for more Asian states to join the Partnership. Thailand joined in 2000, followed by Afghanistan in 2003, Mongolia in 2004⁵ and Australia in 2009. Furthermore, in 2003 the Contact Group with the Asian Partners for Co-operation – today the APCG – was officially established as a permanent forum for informal dialogue between the OSCE and the Asian Partners.

The mechanism for becoming an OSCE Partner for Co-operation is based on the consensus rule, which is applied to all decision-making within the OSCE. Hence, a country wishing to become a Partner has first to submit a formal request to the OSCE Chairpersonship. In the following extensive consultations process, the participating States consider several factors, such as existing close relations between the applicant country and the OSCE, and a common understanding for shared principles, values and objectives, as well as for security issues. There needs to be a demonstrated intention to closely participate in the OSCE’s work and to acknowledge the value of a partnership framework with the OSCE. These factors are not exclusive, nor are they cumulative. Eventually, a formal consensus decision by all 57 participating States must be reached before granting Partner status to the applicant.⁶ Every now and then, the OSCE receives inquiries from states all over the globe. The last time such process was formally initiated was in 2013 when Libya applied to become an OSCE Mediterranean Partner – as yet unsuccessfully.⁷

Since 2000, the OSCE together with the Asian Partners has organised a joint annual conference to discuss matters of mutual interest.⁸ The Asian Partners take pride in hosting this event in an informally agreed rotation.⁹ Recurring themes of the OSCE Asian Partnership have included confidence-building measures, options for addressing transnational threats and prospects for enhanced economic

⁴ Cf. OSCE Permanent Council, *Decision No. 94: Terms of Reference with Regard to Japan and Korea and to Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Morocco and Tunisia* (PC.DEC/94), 5 December 1995, <https://www.osce.org/node/20366>.

⁵ Mongolia went on to becoming a participating State in 2012.

⁶ OSCE, *Factsheet on OSCE Partners for Co-operation*, updated 13 June 2014, <https://www.osce.org/node/77951>.

⁷ OSCE, *Libya Applies to Become OSCE Partner*, 17 June 2013, <https://www.osce.org/node/102800>.

⁸ The joint conferences are based on Permanent Council decisions by which the participating States agree on the date and venue, as well as on the agenda and organisational modalities of the event. The PC decisions determine the event’s qualification as a (joint) OSCE event, to take place outside the OSCE region.

⁹ Afghanistan is an exception here with only one joint conference implemented (Kabul, 2008). The deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan hampered chances for a consensus-based agreement on further joint events in the country.

cooperation. Many of the events held within the OSCE Asian Partnership framework have sought to encompass all three dimensions of security. Similar topics are covered in the APCG meetings and in other events organised with or by the Asian Partners, which over the years have substantially contributed to the OSCE's comprehensive concept of security.

Nonetheless, in the day-to-day life of the Organization, the OSCE Asian Partnership has remained somewhat marginalised, particularly in comparison to the OSCE's Mediterranean Partnership, which involves countries that are geographically closer, simplifying the formation of common priorities. The Mediterranean Partnership has benefitted from the support of those OSCE participating States that are themselves part of or in close vicinity to the Mediterranean region. This is reflected in a high-level, often ministerial-level representation of both participating countries and partner States at OSCE Mediterranean Conferences and in the adoption of relevant documents such as the Milan 2018 Ministerial Declaration on Security and Co-operation in the Mediterranean.¹⁰ However, the OSCE Asian Partnership has evolved over the years acknowledging the growing interconnectedness between the OSCE area and the Asian states and the increasing number of common challenges and opportunities.¹¹

1. The OSCE Asian Partnership for Co-operation: Framework and mechanisms

The importance of the OSCE Asian Partnership for Co-operation has been underscored in a number of OSCE documents, such as the Charter for European Security adopted at the 1999 Istanbul Summit and the OSCE Strategy to Address Threats to Security and Stability in the Twenty-First Century adopted at the Maastricht Ministerial Council meeting in 2003.¹² This last document in particular reiterated the interconnectedness between the security of the OSCE area and that of the adjacent regions. At the Astana Summit in 2010,¹³ the OSCE participating States recommitted to enhancing their level of interaction with the Asian and Mediterranean Partners.

Today, the OSCE APCG serves as the main forum for an open and interactive dialogue with the Asian Partners. It meets approximately every two months at the ambassadorial level and is chaired by the preceding year's OSCE Chairpersonship

¹⁰ OSCE Ministerial Council, *Document Nr. 4, Declaration on Security and Co-operation in the Mediterranean* (MC.DOC/4/18), 7 December 2018, <https://www.osce.org/node/406532>.

¹¹ OSCE Ministerial Council, *Document No.2, Declaration Co-operation with the OSCE Asian Partners* (MC.DOC/2/20), 4 December 2020, <https://www.osce.org/node/472839>.

¹² OSCE, *Charter for European Security* (Istanbul Document), 18 November 1999, <https://www.osce.org/node/17502>; and *OSCE Strategy to Address Threats to Security and Stability in the Twenty-First Century*, 2 December 2003, <https://www.osce.org/node/17504>.

¹³ OSCE, *Astana Commemorative Declaration: Towards a Security Community* (SUM.DOC/1/10/Corr.1), 3 December 2010, <https://www.osce.org/node/74985>.

(Slovakia in 2020 and Albania in 2021). The APCG takes a demand-driven approach to selecting topics for discussion as agreed by the Asian Partners and the Chairperson of the OSCE Asian Partners for Co-operation Group. It also places a strong emphasis on sharing experiences and lessons learned. The topics for the APCG meetings are generally suggested by the Asian Partners, with each country co-organising one APCG meeting per year.

Besides regular briefings by the OSCE and the Asian Partners for Co-operation Group Chairpersonships, the meetings often include presentations by senior representatives from the capitals of the Asian Partner States, who provide information about security-related developments and activities in their countries and suggest possible areas for cooperation. Representatives of OSCE executive structures report on OSCE activities, and representatives of partner organisations present relevant work with an Asian or South-East Asian dimension. Preparations for or follow-up on main events and activities are also on the agenda. In the periods between APCG meetings, day-to-day dialogue on specific activities or in preparation for upcoming events is maintained through informal consultations between contact points in Vienna.

A wide range of topics are covered such as information and communication technology, cybersecurity and related confidence-building measures, preventing and countering violent extremism and radicalisation that may lead to terrorism, initiatives for empowering women and girls including the role of women in economic development, economic connectivity and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In addition, several of the Asian Partners have repeatedly demonstrated their interest in the OSCE as a possible model for security cooperation in East and North-East Asia, particularly in the OSCE's experience in implementing confidence- and security-building mechanisms (CSBMs) through multilateral cooperation.¹⁴

Participating States that have proven to be particularly engaged in the APCG are former Chairs of the Group, among them Kazakhstan, which chaired the Asian Contact Group in 2011. This was the last year with six Asian Partners and the annual Conference was then still held in Mongolia, which became a full OSCE participating State in 2012 (see below). When Ukraine chaired the Group in 2014, the discussions at the annual conference in Tokyo were heavily impacted by the outbreak of the crisis in and around Ukraine. At the same time, several Asian Partners contributed to the setup of the Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine. In another example, Switzerland and Serbia implemented a joint working programme in 2015 and 2016.¹⁵ Based on the 2014 Basel Ministerial Declaration recommendations, the

¹⁴ This is reflected in concrete initiatives particularly by the Republic of Korea. Cf. OSCE, *The OSCE Asian Partnership for Co-operation. Reflections and Perspectives*, Vienna, OSCE, December 2020, p. 57-59, <https://www.osce.org/node/197801>.

¹⁵ In 2013, the Foreign Ministers of Switzerland and Serbia (Chairmanships of 2014 and 2015 respectively) presented a joint work plan aiming to coordinate their activities. See: OSCE, *Swiss and Serbian Foreign Ministers Prepare to Lead the OSCE*, 2 July 2013, <https://www.osce.org/node/103220>.

programme boosted the visibility of the Partnership through several initiatives, including the OSCE Asian Conference in Seoul in 2015 held at the ministerial level; the participation of the Secretary General of ASEAN in the 2016 OSCE Asian Conference in Bangkok; and an Asian Contact Group meeting in Vienna, also in 2016, with Afghanistan's Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Co-operation as keynote speaker.

As Chair of the Group in 2017, Germany hosted the 2017 OSCE Asian Conference in Berlin, in which again the Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister participated and some of the discussions were dedicated to the OSCE's engagement with Afghanistan. Austria as the APCG Chair in 2018 successfully implemented a high-level conference on multilateralism. In 2019, when Italy chaired the Group, the OSCE Asian Conference was held in Tokyo with the participation of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office. Despite the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Slovakia conducted a very successful APCG Chairpersonship in 2020, with all relevant meetings transferred to online formats and the successful adoption of the aforementioned Tirana Ministerial Declaration.¹⁶ It is now for Albania as 2021 APCG Chair, in agreement with the Swedish Chairpersonship, to follow up on the recommendations of the Tirana Ministerial Declaration aimed at further promoting and expanding the existing dialogue and cooperation with the Asian Partners.

Over the years, cooperation at the operational level has been strengthened significantly. The Asian Partners for Co-operation have contributed actively to the OSCE's work, through the deployment of observers to electoral missions of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the secondment of their nationals to OSCE field operations, financial contributions to the activities of various OSCE units, institutions and field operations, as well as through financial support for the National Dialogue Project in Ukraine and for the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine.

Some of this was implemented through the Partnership Fund, which was established in 2007 and is financed exclusively through extra-budgetary contributions. It aims at fostering "deeper relations with the Mediterranean and Asian Partners for Co-operation" and serves as a means of financing seminars, workshops, training courses as well as dissemination of printed materials.¹⁷ The Asian Partners act as both beneficiaries and contributors to the Fund. At the same time, however, extra-budgetary contributions of the Asian Partners to the OSCE are often pledged directly towards their project of choice. Equally, the majority of projects with substantial

¹⁶ An attempt was made to adopt a previous version of the declaration one year earlier during the Bratislava Ministerial Council meeting, however due to the general lack of consensus at the meeting, the document failed to be adopted. Cf. Stephanie Liechtenstein, "The 26th OSCE Ministerial Council meeting in Bratislava: A Breakdown in Cooperative Security?", in *Security and Human Rights Monitor Analysis*, 17 December 2019, <https://www.shrmonitor.org/the-26th-osce-ministerial-council-meeting-in-bratislava-a-breakdown-in-cooperative-security>.

¹⁷ Cf. OSCE Permanent Council, *Decision No. 812: Establishment of a Partnership Fund (PC.DEC/812)*, 30 November 2007, point 1, <http://www.osce.org/node/29502>.

involvement of OSCE Partners for Co-operation are developed and implemented by OSCE executive structures but are not directly funded through the Partnership Fund.

Consequently, the Partnership Fund has been of somewhat limited relevancy to the Asian Partners and is mainly used by the APCG Chair to pledge resources required for Partnership-related activities, such as travel expenses for speakers invited to Partner meetings conducted throughout the year.

Additionally, a repository programme for the second package of Afghanistan-related projects (Afghan Repository Fund) was created in 2012 to facilitate the implementation of the Vilnius Ministerial Council Decision No. 4/11 on Strengthening OSCE Engagement with Afghanistan. This Fund is active still today; however, most funds are allocated directly towards the projects implementing Afghan components (see below).

The topics prioritised within the APCG and in the Asian Partners' individual relationship with the OSCE reflect their heterogeneity, while at the same time their engagement has significantly contributed to the advancement of the OSCE Asian Partnership.

Afghanistan, Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea and Thailand as members of the APCG certainly share some similarities, however each Partner has its own priority areas as well as its distinguishing place in the Partnership and should therefore be discussed individually.

2. The Asian Partners: A heterogeneous but well-functioning group

Afghanistan

At the 2007 Ministerial Council in Madrid, the OSCE participating States established a foundation for the OSCE engagement with Afghanistan by adopting Decision No. 4/07.¹⁸ This commitment was later reinforced in 2011 at the Vilnius Ministerial Council with the adoption of Decision No. 4/11.¹⁹ The initial activities predominantly focused on security and management of borders between the Central Asian states and Afghanistan, later developing into projects covering combatting terrorism and trafficking in small arms, light weapons, illicit drugs and human beings.²⁰

¹⁸ OSCE Ministerial Council, *Decision No. 4/07 on OSCE Engagement with Afghanistan* (MC.DEC/4/07), 30 November 2007, <https://www.osce.org/node/29470>.

¹⁹ OSCE Ministerial Council, *Decision No. 4/11 on Strengthening OSCE Engagement with Afghanistan* (MC.DEC/4/11), 7 December 2011, <https://www.osce.org/node/86080>.

²⁰ For details on the Afghanistan-related project activity see: OSCE, *The OSCE Asian Partnership for Co-operation*, cit., p. 62-69.

However, as no consensus was reached on the implementation of project activities inside the country, the only direct OSCE engagement with Afghanistan involved the deployment of the five ODIHR election support teams in 2004, 2005, 2009, 2010 and 2014. Invitations from Afghanistan's national electoral commission were received for the 2018 parliamentary and 2019 presidential elections, but the consultations did not reach Permanent Council level.

Financial support is a challenge as the activities are fully dependent on securing relevant extra-budgetary funding. The OSCE participating States reconfirmed their commitment to Afghanistan in the 2014 Basel Ministerial Council Declaration No. 10/14, and equally, the Tirana Ministerial Council Declaration No. 2/20 has a separate paragraph on OSCE engagement with Afghanistan highlighting the priority areas for cooperation and calling for strengthened partnerships including with other regional actors.

In recent years, most of the Afghanistan-related projects have been implemented in the OSCE field operations in Central Asia, provided that the relevant host country has given its consent and relevant funding could be secured. Benefitting particularly from the OSCE border and custom management activities, Afghanistan has participated in relevant training courses and seminars offered by the OSCE Border Management Staff College and the OSCE Programme Office, both located in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, as well as the OSCE Centre in Ashgabat. This however is only a fraction of OSCE projects with significant Afghan components, as other initiatives are also present.²¹ Through the Ministerial Council Decision 4/11, the OSCE is mandated to further develop its overall engagement with Afghanistan by expanding the scope of its assistance to all three dimensions of the OSCE's comprehensive approach to security. This includes the enrolment of Afghan students in MA programmes run by the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, or OSCE regional training courses on water diplomacy in Almaty, Kazakhstan, or more generally, project activities that facilitate the inclusion of Afghan representatives in order to promote the country's familiarisation with OSCE norms, principles, commitments and best practices.

Australia

The youngest OSCE Asian Partner for Co-operation, Australia has made its own contributions to a number of activities in all three dimensions. Between 2012 and 2015, the Australian Agency for International Development supported the ODIHR in cooperation with the OSCE field operations and the OSCE Special Representative on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings in the implementation of a project focused on enhancing local, national and regional capacities to ensure human rights protection of trafficked persons and vulnerable groups in Central Asia.²²

²¹ Cf. *ibid.*

²² Australian Embassy and Permanent Mission to the United Nations, *Australia to Support the OSCE's Anti-human Trafficking in Central Asia*, Vienna, 21 February 2012, <https://austria.embassy>.

Combatting trafficking in human beings has remained a priority issue of Australia's engagement with the OSCE in subsequent years. Worth mentioning is a side event on combatting trafficking in human beings at a conference on "Effective Multilateralism in the Globalized World – The Case of Europe and Asia Pacific" held in 2018 where the Australian Government Ambassador for People Smuggling and Human Trafficking was guest speaker. Similarly, in 2019 Australia and Italy co-organised a Contact Group meeting on the topic of "Countering Trafficking in Human Beings and Modern Slavery", presenting the Australian National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking and Slavery.²³

More recently, Australia has focused on supporting OSCE activities dedicated to leveraging technology and innovation in dealing with transnational threats and other challenges that affect both the OSCE and the Asia-Pacific regions. In the period between 2018 and 2019, the country financially supported, in particular, the OSCE Advance Passenger Information Project.

In addition, Australia has been hosting events including the OSCE Asian Conference in Adelaide in 2013 dedicated to improving security of women and girls, promoting the economic empowerment of women and combatting all forms of human trafficking, and another event in Canberra in 2018 dedicated to common challenges and opportunities for the Indo-Pacific and OSCE regions.

Japan

The first OSCE Asian Partner for Co-operation, Japan enjoys a special status among other Partners²⁴ and has been part of countless CSCE and later OSCE events and activities, starting with the Helsinki Summit in 1992. Japan has been the only non-participating state directly referred to in the Helsinki Document as one of the countries that "display an interest in the CSCE, share its principles and objectives, and are actively engaged in European co-operation through relevant organizations".²⁵ The Document further stated that the invitation to attend the CSCE meetings on the topics of mutual interest should be extended to Japan, with its representatives being granted a possibility to contribute to said meetings. Since 1992, Japan has thus been invited to participate in the Senior Council, the Permanent Council, the Forum for Security Co-operation as well as Summit meetings, review and preparatory meetings, and the Ministerial Councils.

[gov.au/vien/OSCEMediaReleaseOSCEMediaRelease.html](https://www.gov.au/vien/OSCEMediaReleaseOSCEMediaRelease.html).

²³ OSCE, *The OSCE Asian Partnership for Co-operation*, cit., p. 54.

²⁴ For Japan's special status as referenced in the OSCE's rules of procedure from December 2006, see OSCE Ministerial Council, *OSCE Rules of Procedure*, cit.

²⁵ CSCE, *The Challenges of Change, Helsinki Document*, 9-10 July 1992, point IV(9), <https://www.osce.org/node/39530>.

Over the years, Japan has steadily contributed to OSCE projects and activities both by actively participating in the OSCE meetings and by financially supporting OSCE projects, in particular those pertaining to Afghanistan. The country is listed among the top ten extra-budgetary donors due to its financial support of the OSCE field operations in the Western Balkans, Central Asia and Ukraine, having contributed over 11 million euro between 2009 and 2020.²⁶

Since 1999, Japan has regularly seconded its experts to OSCE field operations, such as the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine. In the past two decades, Japan has also hosted five OSCE Asian Conferences and continues to regularly contribute to broadening the OSCE agenda by suggesting additional topics and aspects. In November 2020, Japanese and other Asian Partner speakers, some of them alumni of the Border Management Staff College, presented in the OSCE round table dedicated to "Leveraging innovation and technology to address twenty-first-century challenges and crises across the OSCE and Asian Partners for Co-operation".²⁷

The Republic of Korea

In 1994, following an official request submitted by Seoul, the Republic of Korea was invited, as an observer, to the Budapest Review Conference.²⁸ The relationship between the country and the OSCE was formalised in the 1996 Lisbon Summit Declaration with the Republic of Korea being invited to attend the OSCE meetings and activities.²⁹ Since becoming a partner for cooperation, the Republic of Korea has hosted four OSCE Asian Conferences, the most recent in 2020 held virtually due to COVID-19 restrictions. In the last decade, the Republic of Korea has also seconded experts to the OSCE and provided experts for ODIHR election observation missions particularly in the Western Balkans and in Central Asia.³⁰

Lately, the country has further enhanced its engagement with the OSCE by increasing its financial contributions to the Organization. Korea has mostly supported projects dealing with transnational threats, in particular cyber security and the security of information and communication technologies (ICT), combatting violent extremism and terrorism, and the challenges and opportunities of new technologies for peace and security.³¹ During the 2015 OSCE Asian Conference in Seoul, a session was devoted to discussing best practices

²⁶ Figures for extra-budgetary pledges and voluntary contributions are accessible through the OSCE annual reports, <https://www.osce.org/annual-reports>.

²⁷ OSCE, *The OSCE Asian Partnership for Co-operation*, cit., p. 53.

²⁸ Cf. Soong Hee Lee, "The OSCE and South Korea", in IFSH, *OSCE Yearbook 2001*, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2002, p. 433-440, <https://ifsh.de/file-CORE/documents/yearbook/english/01/Lee.pdf>.

²⁹ OSCE, *Lisbon Document 1996* (DOC.S/1/96), 3 December 1996, <https://www.osce.org/node/39539>.

³⁰ Fabrizio Scarpa, "The OSCE and its Asian Partners. A Meeting of Minds", in *OSCE Magazine*, December 2006, p. 17, <https://www.osce.org/node/22474>.

³¹ OSCE, *The OSCE Asian Partnership for Co-operation*, cit., p. 57.

in developing confidence-building measures on cyber security.³² Cyber security was also at the centre of a side event entitled “The OSCE and Its Asian Partners – Strengthening Cyber Security”, organised on the margins of 2016 OSCE Asian Conference in Bangkok. It sought to “share information on and OSCE experience in developing risk reduction and confidence-building measures for the field of cyber security”.³³ The event to some extent inspired the inter-regional conferences which have been organised annually since 2017 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, in close cooperation with the OSCE Secretariat. Every two years the conference is dedicated solely to cyber security-related issues, but cyber security features prominently every year. The 2021 event will again be dedicated entirely to cyber/ICT security.

Through its active engagement in OSCE activities, the Republic of Korea promotes opportunities to share experience and lessons learned between the OSCE and the Asian Partners, particularly with regard to the OSCE’s expertise in CSBMs. As the situation on the Korean peninsula remains unsteady, the country strives to place the security challenges it faces on the OSCE agenda in view of identifying and adopting a set of fitting CSBMs.

Thailand

As the only OSCE Partner-member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Thailand has served as an additional link between the OSCE and the Asia-Pacific region. Since becoming a Partner for Co-operation in 2000, Thailand has organised several OSCE Asian Conferences (in 2002, 2006, 2012 and 2016). In 2021, Thailand will host this annual event for the fifth time. It also organised several workshops focused on the applicability of the OSCE’s comprehensive security concept in the Asian context, such as the 2010 and 2012 workshops on combatting drug cultivation and trafficking.³⁴ The workshops proved to be an effective opportunity to share best practices and lessons learned in addressing these challenges.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals, which have acquired a central place in the OSCE agenda, were widely addressed at the 2016 OSCE Asian Conference held in Bangkok, with a focus on the role of regional organisations such as the OSCE and ASEAN.

³² OSCE, *Consolidated Summary 2015 OSCE Asian Conference* (SEC.GAL/146/15/Rev.1), 24 July 2015, <https://www.osce.org/node/179621>.

³³ OSCE, *Consolidated Summary 2016 OSCE Asian Conference* (SEC.GAL/121/16), 26 July 2016, point 3.2, <https://www.osce.org/node/280701>.

³⁴ OSCE Permanent Council, *Decision No. 903: Workshop on Combatting Illicit Crop Cultivation and Enhancing Border Security and Management: Thailand as a Case Study* (PC.DEC/903), 12 November 2009, <https://www.osce.org/node/40262>; and *Decision No. 1003/Rev.1: 2012 Chairmanship Workshop on Promoting Security through a Comprehensive Approach to Development in Border Areas – A Capacity-Building Programme According to Thai Experience* (PC.DEC/1003/Rev.1), 22 December 2011, <https://www.osce.org/node/86721>.

In an effort to further promote cooperation with the OSCE, in 2018 Thailand began offering priority fellowships to participants from OSCE participating States and Partners for Co-operation wishing to attend the annual training courses facilitated through the initiative of the Thailand International Cooperation Agency. So far, 140 fellowships have been awarded to participants from the OSCE region as well as to participants from OSCE partner countries.³⁵ In 2020, the programme was interrupted due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mongolia: Transition from Asian Partner to participating State

In 2012, eight years after becoming a Partner for Co-operation and following a Ministerial Council Decision adopted by consensus through a silence procedure,³⁶ Mongolia became the 57th OSCE participating State.³⁷ A year prior, in 2011, Mongolia had expressed its willingness to become a full participating State, accepting all the commitments and responsibilities enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act,³⁸ the Charter of Paris for a New Europe³⁹ and all other relevant OSCE documents.⁴⁰ Following a report based on a visit to Ulaanbaatar by the Chairperson of the Permanent Council, the Secretary General and a team of experts, it was agreed that Mongolia was seriously committed to meeting the OSCE requirements. It was then determined that Mongolia's territory would be exempted from the application of CSBMs as defined in Annex I to the Vienna Document.⁴¹ Mongolia's change in status remains the only one of its kind until today.

Mongolia has made a valuable contribution to the work of the OSCE in all three dimensions of security. It took on a pro-active role in the crisis in and around Ukraine, seconding to the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine established in 2014. It also chaired the OSCE's Forum for Security Co-operation in early 2015. Moreover, in the spring of 2015 Mongolia hosted a regional conference on the OSCE Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security, which brought together representatives of ministries of foreign affairs and defence, national parliaments, armed forces and academia from Central Asian OSCE participating States and the OSCE Asian Partners for Co-operation. The discussions focused on the role of armed and security forces in democratic societies, international humanitarian

³⁵ OSCE, *The OSCE Asian Partnership for Co-operation*, cit., p. 59-60.

³⁶ Should the Chairperson suggest the adoption of a decision through a silence procedure, he/she should make such suggestion with indication of the amount of time for the expiration of the period of silence. Cf. OSCE Ministerial Council, *OSCE Rules of Procedure*, cit.

³⁷ OSCE Ministerial Council, *Decision No. 2/12 on the Accession of Mongolia to the OSCE* (MC.DEC/2/12), 21 November 2012, <https://www.osce.org/node/97736>.

³⁸ CSCE, *Helsinki Final Act*, 1 August 1975, <https://www.osce.org/node/39501>.

³⁹ CSCE, *Charter of Paris for a New Europe*, 21 November 1990, <https://www.osce.org/node/39516>.

⁴⁰ Cf. OSCE, *Mongolia Requests to Become OSCE Participating State*, 28 October 2011, <https://www.osce.org/node/84562>.

⁴¹ OSCE, *Vienna Document on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures* (FSC.DEC/14/11), 30 November 2011, <https://www.osce.org/node/86597>.

law, security sector reform, rights of armed forces personnel and the parliamentary oversight of security forces.⁴²

Transitioning from a Partner for Co-operation to an OSCE participating State, Mongolia gained access to all the benefits that come with such status including the support and expertise of the OSCE's executive structures. In addition, Mongolia could invite or allow the deployment of an OSCE field operation on its territory. By becoming a participating State, Mongolia has set a precedent in the OSCE, however no other Asian or Mediterranean Partner for Co-operation has so far initiated the same process.

3. Two very different sisters: The Asian and the Mediterranean Partnerships

The OSCE currently has 11 Partners for Co-operation, among them the five discussed Asian Partners as well as six Mediterranean Partners: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia. The Mediterranean Partnership Group is chaired by the incoming OSCE Chairpersonship and the Asian Partnership Group by the preceding year's (Poland and Albania respectively in 2021). OSCE relations with the Mediterranean Partners date back to the signing of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act with Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Morocco and Tunisia closely associated with the Helsinki process, while Jordan became a Mediterranean Partner in 1998. Relevant CSCE/OSCE documents before and in the early 1990s made exclusive reference to the Mediterranean Partnership, or generally to the Partners for Co-operation, or to OSCE engagement with Japan and/or the Republic of Korea.⁴³

This approach continued regardless of the creation of the Asian Partnership framework in 1995, which consisted only of Japan and the Republic of Korea until Thailand joined the Asian Group in November 2000. In December 2000, Japan contributed to formalising the partnership framework by hosting the first of the now annual joint conferences with the OSCE.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, until 2003 the Asian Partners lacked a partnership framework like the Mediterranean Contact Group.⁴⁵ It was only in March 2003 that a Contact Group with the Asian Partners

⁴² OSCE, *Mongolia Hosts OSCE Conference on the Role of Armed and Security Forces in Democratic Societies*, 10 March 2015, <http://www.osce.org/node/144226>.

⁴³ OSCE Ministerial Council, *Final Document of the Sixth Meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council* (MC.DOC/1/97), Copenhagen, 18-19 December 1997, <https://www.osce.org/node/40427>; OSCE Permanent Council, *Decision No. 241: New Modalities for OSCE Meetings on Human Dimension Issues* (PC.DEC/241), 9 July 1998, <https://www.osce.org/node/20556>; OSCE Ministerial Council, *Final Document of the Seventh Meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council* (MC.DOC/1/98), Oslo, 1-3 December 1998, <https://www.osce.org/node/40439>; OSCE, *Charter for European Security*, cit.

⁴⁴ OSCE, *Consolidated Summary of the OSCE-Japan Conference 2000: "Comprehensive Security in Central Asia – Sharing OSCE and Asian Experiences"*, Tokyo, 11-12 December 2000, <https://www.osce.org/node/42184>.

⁴⁵ The Mediterranean Contact Group had been established in 1994 by Chapter X of the CSCE Budapest Document, cf. CSCE, *Towards a Genuine Partnership in a New Era. Budapest Document*

for Co-operation was launched with the first meeting contributing to a formalised structure of the Group. Until today, and since 2020 under its new name as the OSCE Asian Partners for Co-operation Group, this format has served as the main forum for dialogue with the Asian Partners.

With the developing and expanding Asian Partnership, the two groups steadily diverged from each other even though still loosely connected through overlapping thematic priorities oriented towards the overall OSCE agenda. Joint meetings of the Asian and Mediterranean Contact Groups were therefore envisaged to, *inter alia*, foster dialogue and cross-fertilisation and to assess the state of cooperation between the OSCE and its Partners for Co-operation.⁴⁶ In July 2007, the first joint contact group (JCG) meeting was held on the topic of “The OSCE and Its Partners for Co-operation: Present State of Affairs and Way Forward”. The JCG was never formally established by a consensus document. Until 2014, JCG meetings were held once a year (with the exception of two meetings held in 2009) and dedicated to a topic of common interest to both groups. In addition, a representative of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly regularly briefed the JCG on the conclusions of their annual session, yet this feature disappeared when the JCG meetings were discontinued in 2015.

The last joint meeting was held in October 2014 on “the role of women in building democracy” as in 2015 the two Chairs of the Asian and Mediterranean Partnership Groups in agreement with the OSCE Chairpersonship decided against holding a joint meeting. Instead, they suggested that future joint meetings be convened only when a partner country or the Chair of either Group expressed such wish or the OSCE Chairpersonship considered it necessary. Since then, however, no joint meeting of the two Partnership Groups has been held.

This development did not come as a complete surprise. At the 2014 Basel Ministerial Council meeting two separate Ministerial Declarations were adopted, one dedicated to the Asian and the other to the Mediterranean Partnership. The 2014 document on cooperation with the Asian Partners was a milestone as it was the first document dedicated exclusively to the OSCE Asian Partnership. All previous documents dealt jointly with the Asian and the Mediterranean Partnerships, or specifically with the OSCE’s special engagement with Afghanistan. Several paragraphs of the two declarations were identical and some of them even of limited relevance to the peculiarities of the OSCE Asian Partnership and rather a concession to requests from participating States.⁴⁷ Still, it created a significant basis for the Partnership to develop and expand with the 2020 Tirana Ministerial Declaration fully phrased

1994, 21 December 1994, p. 44-45, <https://www.osce.org/node/39554>.

⁴⁶ OSCE, *The OSCE Mediterranean Partnership for Co-operation. A Compilation of Relevant Documents and Information*, Vienna, OSCE, December 2014, p. 32, <https://www.osce.org/node/132176>.

⁴⁷ Cf. OSCE Ministerial Council, *Ministerial Declaration on Co-operation with the Asian Partners*, cit.; OSCE Ministerial Council, *Declaration on Co-operation with the Mediterranean Partners* (MC. DOC/9/14), 5 December 2014, <https://www.osce.org/node/130561>.

based on the increased number of activities successfully implemented since 2014.

These activities exemplify also the crucial differences between the two Partnership Groups as most of the Asian Partners focus their engagement on sharing experiences and lessons learned on topics of mutual interest and common concern. They wish to actively contribute to the OSCE's overall agenda and several of them do regularly pledge to OSCE extra-budgetary activities which are in line with their national priorities. Consequently, with the exception of Afghanistan, the Asian Partners rarely perceive themselves as beneficiaries of OSCE activities, but rather look at contributing expertise by for instance seconding staff to OSCE operations. Thus, in contrast to the Mediterranean Partnership, OSCE projects are hardly ever designed with an exclusive focus on the Asian Partners, while they are still regularly invited to participate in a variety of activities of potential relevance to them.

4. What next for the OSCE Asian Partnership?

Over the past ten years, and even more since the adoption of the 2014 Basel Ministerial Declaration, the OSCE Asian Partnership has steadily developed as a valuable platform for exchanging best practices and valuable experiences. Requests for further steps towards meaningful political dialogue and practical cooperation have been repeatedly voiced from within the Group, underlining its potential.

The 2016 Hamburg Ministerial Council made a particularly significant contribution to the advancement of the Partnerships by approving one Ministerial declaration and three Ministerial decisions that explicitly mention the Partners – with regard to cooperation on counter-terrorism, migration and refugees, connectivity and good governance and ICT/cybersecurity.⁴⁸ Such declarations have encouraged the Asian Partners to adopt and implement OSCE principles and commitments across the OSCE's three dimensions. The OSCE has recognised common challenges that “transcend international borders in ‘all’ three dimensions” and as such call for a closer collaboration with the Asian Partners, as reiterated in the 2020 Tirana Ministerial Declaration. The “renewed commitment to deepen and expand dialogue and co-operation”, as stated in the 2014 Basel Ministerial Declaration, has successfully been translated into more practical cooperation. Asian Partners have been invited to take part in several OSCE projects, whilst a growing number of Asian Partners have promoted initiatives within the OSCE context.

⁴⁸ Cf. OSCE Ministerial Council, *Doc 1: Declaration on Strengthening OSCE Efforts to Prevent and Counter Terrorism* (MC.DOC/1/16), 9 December 2016, <https://www.osce.org/node/288176>; *Decision No.3/16, OSCE's Role in the Governance of Large Movements of Migrants and Refugees* (MC.DEC/3/16), 9 December 2016, <https://www.osce.org/node/289491>; *Decision No.4/16 - Decision on Strengthening Good Governance and Promoting Connectivity* (MC.DEC/4/16), 9 December 2016, <https://www.osce.org/node/289316>; *Decision No.5/16 - OSCE Efforts Related to Reducing the Risks of Conflict Stemming from the Use of Information and Communication Technologies* (MC.DEC/5/16), 9 December 2016, <https://www.osce.org/node/288086>.

Yet, there is potential for more concrete action to “promote an outcome-oriented dialogue” as underlined in Tirana in 2020. The OSCE would significantly benefit from a more thorough inclusion of Asian officials and experts in OSCE events, to diversify discussion, broaden the thematical scope and share lessons learned on newly emerging topics relevant to the OSCE’s comprehensive concept of security, including global challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic and digital challenges. In this context, a more systematic OSCE approach to developing relations with Asian regional organisations could be beneficial for broadening OSCE perspectives. Equally, targeted funding of some Partnership mechanisms could help promote new formats for engagement with various actors, including academia, non-governmental organisations and other civil society groups. This would contribute to an enriched and innovative dialogue between the OSCE and its Asian Partners for Co-operation. The OSCE Asian Partnership can be, in this sense, a barometer for the possibility to establish new forms of effective cooperation in dealing with emerging global and cross-dimensional trends of increasing relevance to the OSCE and its participating States.

Updated 3 June 2021

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