

'CSCE Summit, beware of historical indigestion' from Europe (16 November 1990)

Caption: In his editorial of 16 November 1990, three days before the opening of the Paris Conference on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, Emanuele Gazzo, Director of Agence Europe in Brussels, is sceptical about the implications of the meeting of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).

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We have the feeling that the historical events which have recently have created a sort of over-excitement on the part of certain well-meaning zealous persons and that this is driving them to enlarge the picture thus creating a sort of optical effect which gives rise to yet more confusion and illusion, rather than a real change in addition to the one which has already taken place. This is a dangerous tendency, because it can arouse a feeling of satiation among ordinary people — all the more so as this artificial exaggeration is mainly achieved by showing off prestigious personalities topping the bill, and flows of speeches brimming with empty phrases.

The danger is two-fold: on one hand, there is the risk of being rejected through “historical indigestion”, and, on the other, one could witness the race to create new structures for which no-one feels an urgent need and which would, in general, only serve to duplicate those already in existence.

The above remarks have been prompted by the extraordinary show promised by the meeting of the CSCE Conference to open in Paris next Monday. Under these circumstances, to speak of an historical event would almost be an “understatement”: 35 Heads of State or Government, with their strings of experts, who are meeting in Paris with all the logistic complications this entails: an infallible recipe. Perhaps for three days there will be no mention of the recession threatening world economy: the show is guaranteed — hopefully, an exciting one. One might however make the comment that although this meeting falls in the context of a historical process of prime importance for Europe and the world, it is not the driving force or the achievement of such. Historical events have already taken place, they have thrown over the pre-existing order, they are being followed by secondary shocks of unforeseeable magnitude. In the meantime, other events have occurred, outside the European region, but which have influenced and which will continue to influence the latter. History has not come to an end ...

It is justifiable to try to see more clearly as regards the changes that have taken place, and the foreseeable scenarios, and to try to imagine how to give a “natural” follow-up to the “Helsinki process”, and to its evolution since 1975. Is it, however, indispensable to rush to crystallise structures which are now out of date, and so jeopardise the future? We raised several questions on this in our editorials of 17 and 18 October. Let us not forget that the Helsinki process originated from the Soviet attempt (going as far back as 1954 and taken up again in 1969) to sanction, in a formal manner, the Soviet conquests of the 2nd World War with a pan-European conference. The West has managed to link this process to the philosophy of mutual and balanced force reduction (MBFR). It is significant that Monday’s meeting will be preceded by the signing of the CFE Treaty. Three years of difficult negotiations will end in an agreement which is essentially a series of principles, behaviours and procedures aimed at making the notion of “detente” gradually more concrete to the benefit of citizens in particular, all citizens.

History, as we said, has taken upon itself to do the rest. Our time is the “post Helsinki” period and not everyone believes that it is necessary to “re-design” anything. Let us leave, to those who have conquered it, a minimum of freedom and the time necessary to find their way without imprisoning them in a cage, without making them learn “our lesson”. We are in agreement with Max Kampman when he said that “the CSCE is not an institution intended to replace the other institutions existing in Europe and should not be transformed into a “recruitment agency”. It is of course possible to imagine that the creation of a crisis centre is useful. In the same way, countries which wish to do so and which accept certain rules could belong to a parliamentary institution like the one currently annexed to the Council of Europe, but which could very well cut its ties while keeping its heritage of principles ... History should not be a prison, for anyone: let us leave it up to the citizens of Europe to make their history — they have the ability to do so.

Emanuele Gazzo