The Dilemmas of Collective Security

A prominent feature of the cold war regime was that it defined a very definite structure for European security. This was based on a fundamental systemic conflict which expressed itself in the deployment of military forces on a substantial scale, held in check by the nuclear strategic stalemate. At the same time, as we have seen, a political process of consultation and co-operation between the two sides developed, for which the Conference on Cooperation and Security in Europe (CSCE) provided the institutional framework. Embedded within the larger framework of East–West detente of the CSCE was Germany’s Ostpolitik. Both detente and Ostpolitik, just as West Germany’s alliance and European policies, were based on an explicit institutionalist approach, with elements of what we now would call constructivism. The essence of this approach was that the tension between East and West could be mitigated by the absolute gains both sides made as a result of participation in the institutions of detente. As a result, they would have a stake in the continuation of these institutions and this would, in the long run, transform the nature of the relationship itself. This was called Wandel durch Annäherung.

The end of the cold war was the ultimate triumph of this philosophy and the peaceful end to this monumental global struggle was perceived as an extraordinary vindication of this approach.¹ With the end of the fundamental conflict of interests and values between East and West, the future security environment was not defined by a highly militarized confrontation, but by bilateral, sub-regional and intrastate conflicts of interest. The central task of foreign and security policy was seen to be to construct a pan-European security system that included Russia and that would be suited to
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the new international situation. This was no easy task. Indeed the institutionalist agenda foundered quickly for several reasons:

1. The relative security of West European states after the collapse of the cold war regime resulted in a deep-seated unwillingness to get involved in conflicts and security risks that did not affect them directly.

2. Russia was not prepared to subordinate its own security problems to a collective security regime.

The failure to resolve the most basic questions of the principles according to which a new European security order should be created meant that no functional collective security institutions could be created. Hence we arrived at what I have called the central dilemma of European security. It is the enormous paradox that, while on the one hand virtually all of the states in Europe have abandoned older forms of international conduct in which military force played a dominant role, at the same time the transition of the European of states some of which are now quite unstable due to a mismatch between territorial boundaries and social/national identities. The reemergence of ethnic conflicts suppressed during the cold war period requires a system of collective security with effective political, diplomatic and military instruments to prevent conflict, and to enforce and keep the peace.

The conceptual basis of collective security in Europe

The concept of collective security is based on the notion of collective action to support international security against the violation of international law by individual states, in particular the violation of the principle of the renunciation of force to settle disputes. This obliges governments to collectively use force to support states under attack, while at the same time abstain from the use of force to support what they perceive to be their own national interest (except in the case of self-defence against aggression). The security of one state thus becomes the concern of all other states and an agreement of collective security implies that all states will defend the security of each state as if it was their own security that was under threat. A system of collective security requires a common understanding of a stable and just international order. It requires mechanisms whereby in a crisis situation states can agree on who is responsible for the aggression, the need to intervene and the appropriate political and military steps required to maintain or restore