A promise needs a second meeting

Helsinki's bargain between security, rights and review, 1975-91

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The decision

Could rival governments agree on security without making sovereignty a shield against every question about human rights? At Helsinki, 35 participating states signed a political commitment that brought both concerns into the same framework. The difficult work was deciding what would happen after the signing ceremony. [S1-S3]

Abstract

In August 1975, thirty five participating states signed the Helsinki Final Act, combining security principles, economic cooperation and human contacts within one diplomatic framework. The bargain did not end ideological rivalry, legally freeze borders or create a court to enforce every promise. Its importance lay partly in making public commitments available for later scrutiny. Contemporary American records show leaders expecting a process, not a completed peace. The text protected sovereignty while also recognizing human rights and peaceful changes of frontiers by agreement. Follow up meetings kept disputed implementation on the agenda, despite repression and renewed confrontation. Later Vienna and Moscow procedures added ways to raise concerns and seek independent expertise. These institutional developments are observable; a causal share in ending the Cold War is not established here. For Sri Lanka, the conditional lesson is to pair diplomatic promises with duties, evidence, review and remedies, rather than treating signatures as delivery.

Reader's question

What would make a diplomatic commitment useful to Sri Lanka after the photograph has been taken? Helsinki suggests looking beyond the ceremony: who can point to the promise, who has to answer, and when will the parties meet again? This is a question about agreement design, not a proposal to transplant a European security organization.

1. A bargain with incompatible expectations

The Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe opened in Helsinki on 3 July 1973, continued in Geneva from September 1973 to July 1975, and concluded in Helsinki on 1 August 1975. The Final Act's opening records the participating governments. An American briefing described the summit as bringing together the United States, Canada and 33 European states. These are participation and negotiation facts, not proof of compliance. [S1, S2]

The July 1975 American briefing presented the Soviet initiative as a search for confirmation of Europe's postwar political map. It described Western governments using negotiations to press security concerns and freer movement of people and information. This is contemporary American analysis of the bargaining positions, not a neutral transcript of Soviet intentions. [S2]

The June 2019 Helsinki Commission staff overview describes the wider setting: détente, West Germany's Ostpolitik and the Berlin agreement helped make broader talks possible. It also identifies neutral and non-aligned participants as important to facilitating agreement between the opposing blocs. The case therefore treats Helsinki as a multilateral bargain, not a document written by two superpowers alone. [S5]

The choice was not friendship or isolation

One option was to reject a conference that might give the Soviet leadership a visible diplomatic success. Another was to accept a narrow security declaration and leave humanitarian questions outside. The agreement instead combined different areas of cooperation, while stopping short of a legally binding peace treaty. Contemporary American records explicitly called its declarations political and moral commitments. [S2]

Judgment: a package can widen the space for agreement when parties value its components differently. That does not mean every exchange is justified. A government still has to examine which commitments it is accepting, which constraints remain, and whether the language can be used against its own preferred interpretation.

Domestic concern was part of the negotiation

A separate American briefing for a July 1975 meeting records serious concern among Baltic-Americans about recognition of Soviet incorporation of the Baltic states. It says American non-recognition policy was unchanged and recommends an unequivocal reassurance. This demonstrates a live political dispute about the meaning of the agreement. It does not establish that signing legally recognized annexation. [S3]

2. What the document actually joined together

The Final Act's declaration contains ten principles. They include sovereign equality, refraining from force, inviolability of frontiers, territorial integrity, peaceful settlement of disputes and non-intervention. They also include human rights and fundamental freedoms, self-determination, cooperation and good-faith fulfillment of international obligations. The text says these principles are of primary significance and should be applied equally, each interpreted with the others in mind. [S1]

Frontiers were protected against force, not declared incapable of change. Under sovereign equality, the text says frontiers can be changed in accordance with international law, by peaceful means and by agreement. Under refraining from force, it rejects the use or threat of force against territorial integrity or political independence. These provisions belong together. Neither is permission for unilateral violent territorial revision. [S1]

Human rights were inside the security principles. Principle VII commits participating states to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion. It recognizes the individual's right to know and act upon rights and duties in this field. Human contacts and information were also covered elsewhere in the agreement. Calling all human-rights language simply "Basket III" misses its place in the first declaration of principles. [S1, S2]

The wider package covered economic, scientific, technological and environmental cooperation, as well as family contacts, access to information and cultural and educational cooperation. The American briefing separates these areas from the post-conference follow-up arrangements. Agreement across these areas did not mean the parties had agreed on the same political system. [S2]

One practical security provision

The original text called for advance notification of major military manoeuvres exceeding 25,000 troops, subject to its stated geographical and force definitions. Notification was to be given 21 days or more in advance, or as early as possible before a manoeuvre arranged at shorter notice. These thresholds describe a commitment in the 1975 text, not today's rules or a measured reduction in attack risk. [S1]

Judgment: this provision shows why specificity matters. A general promise of trust is difficult to inspect. A notification with defined coverage, content and timing gives governments something concrete to check. It still requires reporting, interpretation and compliance.

3. The signing was the beginning of an argument

In his 1 August 1975 speech, President Gerald Ford said: "Peace is not a piece of paper." He called the conference "a challenge, not a conclusion" and said history would judge promises kept, not merely promises made. This is contemporary advocacy by a participating leader, not an independent evaluation of eventual success. It matters because the public case for signing already depended on subsequent conduct. [S4]

The contemporary summit briefing also said large standing armies still faced each other and military-security questions required other negotiations. The Final Act did not replace alliance commitments, settle every dispute or itself deliver comprehensive arms control. It put a range of promises into a common political framework. [S2]

Build a return path before the parties leave

The briefing describes the follow-up compromise as allowing unilateral, bilateral and multilateral actions to carry forward the work and monitor implementation. It envisaged experts preparing for a senior-official meeting in 1977 to review results and consider further meetings. That is a planned review process, not a claim that compliance had already been independently verified. [S2]

The 2019 Commission overview records subsequent meetings in Belgrade in 1977-78, Madrid in 1980-83 and Vienna in 1986-89. It describes frank debate over non-implementation, limited progress in early rounds and continued agreement to meet. The process preserved a forum in which the parties could argue about promises they had accepted. [S5]

Public commitments gave others a reference point

The Commission overview records the creation of the American Helsinki Commission in June 1976 and the emergence of Helsinki-focused committees and non-governmental groups. It also records persecution of Helsinki monitors. The observed mechanism is not that publication made criticism safe. It is that public wording gave governments and civic actors a shared reference for documenting and challenging conduct. [S5]

Hypothesis: scrutiny is more credible when it connects a documented event to a specific accepted commitment. This can raise the reputational cost of denial. The effect depends on access to evidence, the safety of those collecting it and whether influential actors are willing to respond. A declaration without these conditions may remain a weak instrument.

4. Outcomes that can be dated, and claims that cannot

1 August 1975: a signed framework. The OSCE's official record dates the Final Act to this day; the contemporary briefing identifies 35 participants. These are adoption and participation measures. Thirty-five signatures do not equal thirty-five compliant governments. [S1, S2]

1977-89: repeated review meetings. Belgrade, Madrid and Vienna followed the original conference. The institutional record also describes repression and renewed confrontation during the first decade. Keeping a channel open was an outcome; it was not evidence that rights violations or military risks had disappeared. [S5]

19 January 1989: Vienna concluding document. The OSCE dates this document to the end of the third follow-up meeting. ODIHR identifies it as the source of the Vienna Mechanism, a procedure allowing participating states to raise questions about the human-dimension situation in other participating states. The existence of a procedure is distinct from the resolution of every concern raised through it. [S6, S7]

1991: an additional expert route. ODIHR dates the Moscow Mechanism to the 1991 Conference on the Human Dimension meeting. It describes an additional possibility of ad hoc missions of independent experts to assist with a specific human-dimension problem. This later mechanism was not already present in its eventual form in the 1975 signature. [S7]

The record includes failure and resistance

The Commission's retrospective overview describes persecution of monitors and major confrontations alongside continued diplomacy. Its favorable interpretation of Helsinki's eventual role is an institutional assessment. The case does not turn that interpretation into a measured causal estimate. [S5]

A useful agreement can coexist with violations. But that observation must not become an excuse for endless meetings without action. Judgment: assess whether review yields better evidence, a response, changed practice or a clear record of refusal. Counting meetings alone can reward procedure while hiding failure to deliver.

No unsupported Cold War percentage

This case does not estimate how much of the Cold War's end was caused by Helsinki. Nor does it claim the Final Act alone produced political change, German reunification or restored Baltic independence. The sources support a route from shared commitments to scrutiny and later procedures. They do not isolate that route from leadership changes, domestic movements and other political and economic pressures.

5. Conditional lessons for Sri Lanka

Write the duties, not only the ambition. Judgment: for a diplomatic agreement, specify who must do what, what evidence will show delivery, and which exceptions apply. Separate a political declaration from a treaty, a funded program and an operational procedure. A signature should not silently stand for all four.

Read the principles together. Helsinki placed sovereignty, non-intervention and human rights in the same declaration. Judgment: examine how apparently competing clauses interact. Do not celebrate a favored paragraph while pretending the rest does not exist. Sri Lanka's legal obligations must be assessed on their own texts, not inferred from this European political instrument.

Make review part of the initial bargain. Judgment: agree a date, an agenda, reporting responsibilities and a route for unresolved questions before the ceremony. A review needs enough evidence to distinguish delayed action, disagreement over interpretation and outright refusal. Another summit photograph is not a substitute.

Protect the people who supply evidence. The historical record includes persecution of monitors. Judgment: a reporting system that exposes contributors to retaliation can undermine both rights and the quality of information. Transparency should be paired with practical safeguards, lawful handling of sensitive information and access to answers.

Use specificity where it reduces uncertainty. The manoeuvre-notification provision defined a threshold and notice period. Judgment: adapt that design idea, not its military numbers, when writing reporting deadlines, verification steps or information-exchange commitments. Do not invent precision for outcomes that cannot be reliably measured.

Leave peaceful routes for change. The Final Act protected against force while allowing peaceful frontier change by agreement under international law. Judgment: distinguish stability from a permanent ban on negotiated adjustment. Any Sri Lankan application must respect its own constitutional and international legal context; this is not a territorial recommendation.

Where the comparison stops

Sri Lanka is not Cold War Europe. This case supplies no new diagnosis of Sri Lankan institutions, no current claim about a named diplomatic agreement, and no forecast that copying a review mechanism will produce reconciliation, investment or growth. Membership, security conditions, bargaining power and enforcement options differ.

Decision. Prefer commitments that can be read, questioned and revisited over declarations whose only clear output is the signing. Helsinki's transferable idea is a design discipline: keep the promise, the evidence, the review and the remedy distinct, then connect them deliberately.

Sources and limits

Evidence inspected 12 October 2026 for the 13 October case. Primary agreement language and contemporary American records are separated from later institutional assessments. No current conflict verdict or estimated causal effect is presented. This is independent desk research, not affiliated with Harvard Business School.

S1. Helsinki Final Act, 1 August 1975. Original text, official OSCE-hosted copy. Used for the opening chronology, ten principles, peaceful change, rights and manoeuvre-notification terms. The readable extraction did not expose the full final follow-up section; its specific description here is grounded in S2 instead.
https://news.osce.org/sites/default/files/f/documents/5/c/39501_1.pdf

S2. Kissinger briefing for Ford, July 1975, FRUS document 323. Contemporary summit briefing, undated memorandum prepared for 30 July-1 August. Records 35 participants, political rather than legal commitments, bargaining analysis and planned follow-up. American perspective, not proof of counterpart motives or realized outcomes.
https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v39/d323

S3. Kissinger briefing for Ford, FRUS document 321. Undated memorandum for a 25 July 1975 meeting. Records Baltic-American concerns and the stated unchanged American non-recognition policy. Prevents misreading criticism of the accord as proof of legal recognition of annexation.
https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v39/d321

S4. Ford's Helsinki address, 1 August 1975. Original speech transcript preserved by the University of Virginia Miller Center. Contemporary public argument for implementation, not an evaluation of later success.
https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/august-1-1975-remarks-helsinki

S5. Helsinki Commission staff, June 2019. The Helsinki Process: An Overview. Retrospective institutional history of review meetings, civic scrutiny and repression. Its positive causal assessment is not adopted as an identified effect size.
https://www.csce.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/The-Helsinki-Process-Four-Decade-Overview.pdf

S6. OSCE, Vienna concluding document record. Official document record, dated 19 January 1989. Supports the dated institutional milestone, not a claim of universal compliance.
https://www.osce.org/mc/40881

S7. ODIHR, Human dimension mechanism. Official account of Vienna's 1989 procedure and Moscow's 1991 expert mechanism. Used for institutional functions and origins, not current mission effectiveness.
https://odihr.osce.org/odihr/human-dimension-mechanisms

Limits. No counterfactual effect estimate, universal compliance score or welfare calculation. Notifications are commitments, not measured risk reductions. Later procedures are not backdated to 1975. Sri Lankan lessons are labeled judgment or hypothesis and require local legal, institutional and safety review.