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From crisis to strategy: The OSCE and arms control in a divided Europe

Policy brief

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The Expert Network on the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) is a new initiative launched by the OSCE to inject new ideas and insights into the organisation's policy ecosystem. The ELN is one of the Core Partners, and over the last year has conducted research on the OSCE's toolkit and how it could be used under different future scenarios for European security. This work is supported by the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. The findings reflect the views of the author and do not represent any UK government positions.

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Executive summary

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has faced a deep crisis. Russia and Belarus have blatantly violated key norms of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, severely undermining the OSCE's role in crisis management, arms control, and confidence-building measures (CSBMs). The relevance of these instruments is now tied to ending the war in Ukraine. While the OSCE cannot impose solutions, it remains a potentially vital platform for dialogue.

This policy brief has two parts. The first argues that breaking the impasse requires decisive political leadership and multi-level diplomacy. Lessons from the Cold War's Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) show that informal initiatives, particularly by neutral states, can help overcome deadlock. Leveraging the OSCE can expand the scope of future negotiations and address the war's underlying issues.

The second part examines lessons from the war for CSBMs and arms control, emphasising new challenges posed by unarmed aerial systems (UAS) and long-range precision strikes. Growing military activities in Europe highlight the need for military-to-military contacts for managing escalation risks. The OSCE can facilitate such dialogue, support future ceasefire monitoring, and reassess notification and observation requirements for military exercises.

Recommendations

1. US allies in Europe should use the OSCE as a platform to ensure that any diplomatic process toward ending the war in Ukraine evolves in a coordinated way, considers their interests and embeds bilateral efforts of the United States and Russia in a larger pan-European framework;
2. The OSCE Troika should develop and coordinate a unified and comprehensive agenda for advancing dialogue on CSBMs and arms control instruments in 2025 and 2026, including the organisation of a series of security dialogues in the Forum for Security Co-operation (FSC);
3. OSCE participating States should begin strengthening their capacity for future ceasefire monitoring tasks, establishing robust oversight mechanisms and incorporating effective force protection measures;
4. OSCE participating States should recognise that under conditions of confrontation, military transparency primarily serves purposes of confidence-building about peaceful intentions and military capacities. Such a mindset needs to drive initiatives for adapting existing and developing new CSBMs;
5. OSCE participating States should start laying the groundwork for future arms control measures by defining their own strategic interests and relevant force categories in order to develop policy options that align with national interests.

The OSCE remains a potentially vital platform for dialogue, supporting future ceasefire monitoring and reassessing notification and observation rules for military exercises.

Introduction

Restoring the relevance of CSBMs and arms control instruments is now inseparable from ending the war in Ukraine and rebuilding minimal common ground on European security.

More than three years into Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) remains in an unprecedented crisis. Russia's war has blatantly violated the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, particularly its commitments to refrain from the use of force, uphold the inviolability of borders, respect territorial integrity, and pursue the peaceful settlement of disputes. It has also severely undermined the OSCE's first dimension on politico-military issues, which covers crisis and conflict management, arms control, and confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs). These mechanisms were designed to enhance military predictability, prevent unintended escalation, and foster cooperation in response to unusual military activities or hazardous incidents.

With trust at an all-time low among the 57 OSCE participating States, restoring the relevance of CSBMs and arms control instruments is now inseparable from ending the war in Ukraine and rebuilding minimal common ground on European security. While the OSCE lacks the authority to impose outcomes, it remains a potentially vital platform for inter-state dialogue to explore and facilitate progress. As the only pan-European security organisation involving states with diverse political systems and interests, it can help shape political processes that gradually align national priorities with regional security needs. However, this role depends on two key factors: sufficient institutional capacity to sustain meaningful political engagement, and the related ability to develop robust CSBMs and arms control mechanisms that address evolving security concerns.

At present, the OSCE struggles on both fronts. Since the Russian invasion, EU and NATO members, along with like-minded states, have reinforced and expanded a "no business as usual" policy, that was originally introduced after Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, to uphold OSCE principles and support Ukraine. This policy now limits direct communication with Russia and Belarus, excludes military inspections in both states and keeps the war in Ukraine at the centre of all security discussions. In addition, OSCE decision-making bodies, including the Forum for Security Co-operation (FSC) and informal groups like the Structured Dialogue (SD), remain paralysed by a lack of consensus. Key discussions and events increasingly take place outside OSCE frameworks, often without Russia or Belarus.

At the same time, CSBM and arms control agreements have eroded. In January 2022, just before the invasion, Russia stopped implementing the Vienna Document 2011 inspection regime,¹ citing COVID-19 concerns. Since then, both Russia and Ukraine have ceased participation in the Document's Annual Exchange of Military Information (AEMI). Further undermining arms control, Russia formally withdrew from the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) in May 2023,² after suspending participation in December 2007. NATO members and partners responded by suspending their involvement as well,³ with Belarus following in May 2024.⁴ Meanwhile, remaining risk-reduction and crisis-response mechanisms, such as Chapter III of the Vienna Document 2011 and stabilising measures for localised crisis situations, have not been applied during the war.

Managing confrontation requires leadership

Seizing and strengthening diplomatic opportunities for meaningful dialogue is a precondition for developing effective future CSBMs and arms control instruments.

These developments reflect a broader, long-term shift from cooperative security to growing confrontation in Europe – a trend predating the invasion. The primary divide separates EU and NATO member states from Russia and Belarus, driven by competing visions of European security,⁵ the OSCE's role, and the relationship among its three dimensions: politico-military, economic and environmental, and human rights and fundamental freedoms. Despite these divisions, engagement remains essential to prevent any further deterioration in security relations and the possible escalation of military risks beyond the war in Ukraine. With responsible leadership, there are still diplomatic opportunities to revive meaningful dialogue. Seizing and strengthening these opportunities is a precondition for developing effective future CSBMs and arms control instruments that can address the most pressing security concerns among participating States.

Resolving the current impasse cannot be achieved solely within OSCE structures, however; it requires decisive political leadership from individual states. Historically, such leadership has been essential in driving diplomatic solutions forward. Although today's situation is unique, it is not the first time war in Europe has stalled debates on CSBMs and arms control and threatened the OSCE's role as a political platform. At least in four cases, both the organisation and its predecessor, the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), faced similar crises that risked ending meaningful communication: the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 by the Warsaw Pact, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the declaration of martial law in Poland in 1981 and the Yugoslav wars beginning in 1991. OSCE participating States can draw lessons from these experiences.

Lessons from the past

The Warsaw Pact's invasion in 1968, for example, halted discussions on a European security conference, which the Soviet Union had pursued since the 1950s to legitimise post-World War II borders. It also stalled NATO's proposed mutual force reductions, which aimed to prevent the unilateral withdrawal of U.S. forces from Europe and counterbalance the Warsaw Pact's conventional military superiority. In May 1969, Finland took the initiative to break the deadlock, by endorsing the idea of a conference, while dropping Soviet preconditions, such as recognising two German states and the inviolability of borders, before the start of negotiations. In addition, Finland invited the United States and Canada and proposed Helsinki as a possible venue.⁶

Over the next three years, Finnish diplomats engaged in quiet yet persistent diplomacy, gradually building broad support for initiating preparatory meetings to convene the CSCE.⁷ The breakthrough came in May 1972 when U.S. President Richard Nixon and Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev reached an agreement during their meeting in Moscow: NATO would endorse the CSCE in exchange for Soviet participation in negotiations on reducing conventional forces in Central Europe. This quid pro quo led to the launch of the Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction (MBFR) talks in October 1973 and ultimately to the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in August 1975. However, the subsequent Helsinki process quickly encountered serious obstacles, and by the early 1980s, it faced the risk of stalling entirely.

This became evident at the second follow-up meeting in Madrid, which opened in November 1980 but was soon paralysed by disagreements over the right balance between human rights and security provisions.⁸ The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 and human rights violations in Eastern Europe, particularly the introduction of martial law in Poland in December 1981, deepened existing divisions further. The United States, under President Ronald Reagan, insisted that the CSCE could not conduct “business as usual” with the “perpetrators and those who aid and abet them” as long as the situation in Poland continued.⁹ While the U.S. introduced economic sanctions, European allies remained reluctant,¹⁰ instead using the CSCE to condemn Poland’s actions and blocking further negotiations on pending proposals, particularly on a European disarmament conference.

While the Madrid meeting recessed in March 1982 until November, intra-Western divides persisted. Neutral states once again played a crucial role, mediating between conflicting positions and drafting a new outcome document that linked arms control talks, which NATO allies deemed vital to ensure public support for the 1979 double-track decision, to stronger human rights commitments. A tentative compromise emerged in October 1982. Nevertheless, it took further negotiations until the summer of 1983, including interventions by Finland’s president and the Spanish CSCE chair, to secure an agreement.¹¹ The final Madrid document, among others, created CSCE expert meetings on culture and human rights, but it also mandated the Stockholm Conference on CSBMs and Disarmament in Europe, which by September 1986, established the first “militarily significant and politically binding” measures that form the basis of today’s Vienna Document.¹²

Just three years later, the Cold War formally ended.¹³ As cooperative security relations emerged, participating States established entirely new institutional structures and significantly expanded the responsibilities of the CSCE. At the same time, state disintegration and violent intra-state conflict in Eastern Europe presented unprecedented challenges. A major test came in 1992 with the break-up of Yugoslavia. Following the Yugoslav National Army’s intervention on behalf of Serbia and Montenegro in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the CSCE invoked its newly introduced “consensus-minus-one” mechanism to suspend Yugoslavia’s participation.¹⁴ While this measure allowed the CSCE to maintain a role in the Balkans, it had little effect on Yugoslavia’s actions.¹⁵ Ultimately, it was U.S.-led diplomacy, the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords, and NATO’s military intervention in 1999, which reshaped the political landscape, paving the way for Yugoslavia’s return to the OSCE in November 2000.¹⁶

All four historical episodes highlight a crucial lesson: crisis and confrontation have not been exceptions but an integral part of the CSCE process and the OSCE. As participating States displayed diverse political regimes and competing interests, tensions were hardly surprising. Nevertheless, in each case, the CSCE/OSCE consistently provided a platform for managing differences and eventually fostering common ground, requiring sustained diplomatic efforts, informal diplomacy, and strategic manoeuvring. Two key factors proved essential in overcoming deadlock: the leadership and initiatives of neutral or non-aligned states in facilitating compromise and the willingness of major powers to balance geopolitical imperatives with engagement. Yet, consensus-building was neither swift nor easy. It demanded innovation, multilevel diplomacy, and frequently high-level interventions.

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Creating multilevel diplomacy

Similarly, in the current crisis, much will depend on the new U.S. administration and its approach to European security. In early 2025, General (ret.) Keith Kellogg, President Donald J. Trump's special envoy to Ukraine and Russia, announced that Trump aims to end the war within his first 100 days in office.¹⁷ If successful, April 2025 could mark the time for possible progress. Since then, Trump has spoken twice with Russian President Vladimir Putin on the phone and expressed willingness to meet in person.¹⁸ Both sides have taken steps to establish new communication channels. On February 11, U.S. National Security Advisor Mike Waltz confirmed the administration secured the release of U.S. citizen Marc Fogel, detained in Russia since August 2021.¹⁹ After his second call with Putin on February 12, Trump announced that both sides had agreed to prepare immediate negotiations,²⁰ which Russia confirmed.²¹

On February 18, a U.S. delegation led by Secretary of State Marco Rubio met with Russian representatives, including Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and the President's Aide on Foreign Policy, Yuri Ushakov, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Their discussions covered a broad agenda beyond the war in Ukraine. According to Lavrov, however, both sides agreed to initiate soon a "process for Ukrainian settlement" but emphasised that an "understanding on certain issues" would not "necessarily imply convergence of positions."²² A second meeting on February 27 in Istanbul, Turkey, focused on restoring normal diplomatic relations.²³ According to Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Russia hopes this meeting will be the first in a series of expert consultations aimed at resolving differences and strengthening confidence-building efforts.²⁴

Although such bilateral, high-level engagement between the United States and Russia is indispensable to achieve any meaningful change, US allies in Europe and Ukraine must ensure that its direction takes their own interests into account. So far, neither Ukraine nor European leaders have been directly involved in the ongoing U.S.-Russia talks. Instead, representatives of key European countries have convened twice in Paris and London, with the participation of Canada and Turkey. They have also pledged to "work with President Trump to ensure a strong, just, and lasting peace that guarantees Ukraine's future sovereignty and security."²⁵ Simultaneously, France and the United Kingdom have been exploring the possibility of an initial four-week ceasefire to "assess whether Vladimir Putin is negotiating in good faith."²⁶ While prospects remain uncertain, President Trump has expressed a strong desire for a swift agreement and is exerting pressure on Ukraine to agree to a possible accord with Russia.²⁷

A simple agreement, even if successful in establishing a preliminary truce, however, will be insufficient to achieve a sustainable, long-term resolution. Many critical issues underlying the war, such as security guarantees for Ukraine and arms control, extend beyond bilateral dynamics and touch on fundamental questions about the future of the European security order. Addressing these challenges requires principled, long-term thinking that embraces the necessary level of complexity. Given the deep-seated differences on these issues, European states should actively seek opportunities to broaden the scope of potential negotiations, enhancing the likelihood of overlapping interests. Expanding the platform for dialogue can also encourage buy-in from other states, including Kazakhstan and

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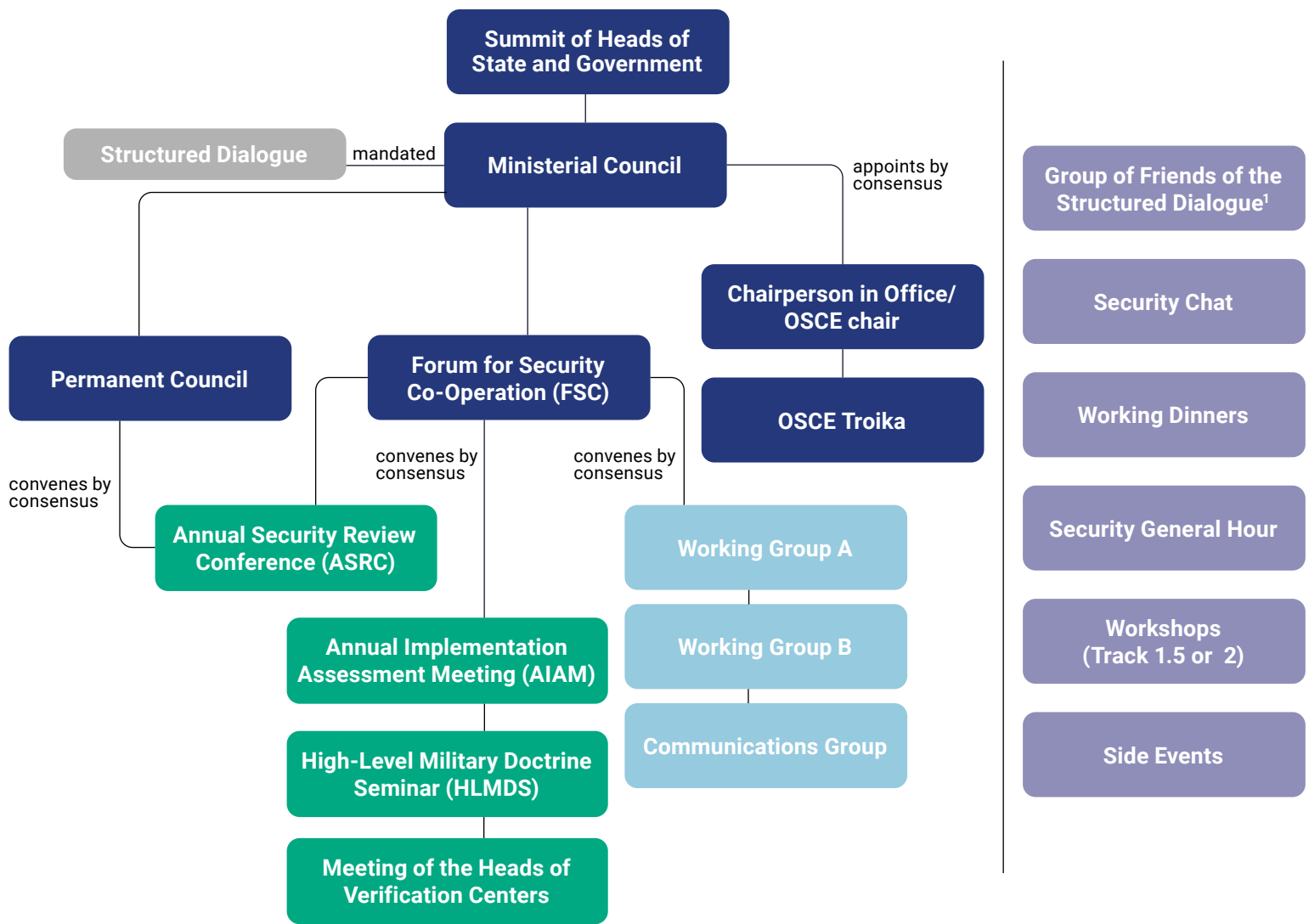
Turkey, that maintain engagement with both Ukraine and Russia. This inclusive approach can help ensure that ending the war in Ukraine becomes a coordinated, pan-European process. The OSCE provides a viable framework for advancing such efforts.

The agreement at the December 2024 OSCE Ministerial meeting on the organisation's leadership, particularly the appointment of Feridun H. Sinirlioğlu from Turkey as OSCE Secretary General with a mandate for the next three years,²⁸ could play a constructive role in this regard. Likewise, the last-minute consensus to designate neutral Switzerland as the OSCE chair for 2026 may create opportunities for diplomacy.²⁹ Building on this foundation, the troika of consecutive OSCE chairs, which now includes Malta, Finland and Switzerland, could, at the right moment, initiate a coordinated political process to reinforce strategic decisions on the war in Ukraine, particularly by advancing dialogue on CSBMs and arms control instruments. This approach, however, would require a shared long-term agenda, in the context of which EU, NATO, and like-minded states may need to reconsider their “no business as usual” stance toward Russia and Belarus. Although this ultimately depends on political will, concrete interpretations of the policy already vary among state parties.³⁰ This divergence creates some space for unilateral, albeit limited, initiatives, without necessarily undermining unity.

In such a scenario, the OSCE provides a multitude of possible platforms and instruments for engagement, encompassing both official decision-making bodies (DMB) and their informal subsidiary bodies (ISB). They also include informal working groups (IWG) and other informal groups of like-minded states and voluntary meetings in various formats, which, among others, could be launched by a single participating State, the OSCE Secretary General, or the Chairperson-in-Office. These can include meetings that bring together both officials and representatives of civil society, particularly non-governmental experts, in Track 1.5 formats. In addition, some official meeting formats, such as the High-Level Military Doctrine Seminar (HLMDS) and the Meeting of the Heads of Verification Centres, require a decision within the FSC, which is based on consensus (Figure 1).

EU, NATO, and like-minded states may need to reconsider their “no business as usual” stance toward Russia and Belarus. The fact that concrete interpretations of the policy already vary among state parties creates space for unilateral initiatives.

Figure 1: OSCE decision-making bodies and informal structures on military aspects of security



- Decision-Making Bodies
- Informal Subsidiary Bodies
- Informal Working Groups
- Consensus-based meetings and events
- Informal and voluntary groups and meetings

1 There are at least five other groups of friends, whose level of activity, however, differs considerably, and which do not cover the politico-military dimension discussed here. They include the group of friends of Georgia, the group of friends on children and armed conflict, the group of friends on safety of journalists, the group of friends on environment and the group of friends of mediation.

Navigating FSC “Security Dialogues”

The FSC remains the central platform for dialogue on military aspects of security as part of the OSCE’s politico-military dimension. In the past, CSBMs and arms control issues have figured prominently as part of the FSC’s standing agenda, particularly the “Security Dialogue”. In 2023 and 2024, however, a number of planned FSC meetings did not take place, because Russia prevented the adoption of the agenda. Among others, this has included security dialogues on topics such as “regional mechanisms for building trust”, “international humanitarian law and command responsibility”, “human security in armed conflict”, and “information integrity in the military space”.³¹ In several cases, the respective FSC Chair, instead, organised voluntary and informal side events, which enabled discussions but did not allow them to make any decisions.

At the same time, Russia and Belarus have recently proposed identifying “unifying topics” within the FSC, emphasising the consensus principle.³² By contrast, most NATO and EU members, along with like-minded states, so far declined to engage in discussions about CSBMs and arms control instruments with Russia and Belarus, at least as long as warfighting in Ukraine continues. They argue that doing so would normalise norm violations, weakening both Ukraine’s position and the OSCE more broadly. Some participating States are also inherently sceptical of any dialogue that could be perceived as restricting their own military freedom of manoeuvre. Under conditions of war and confrontation, CSBMs and arms control measures are seen as benefiting the adversary rather than fostering stability.

Given these circumstances, restarting communication will only be feasible if all participating States act in good faith and agree on security dialogue topics that promote step-by-step progress. One possible approach could be to begin with less politicised issues, such as incident prevention and improved military-to-military communication. In late January 2025, for instance, the incoming FSC chair, Spain, announced its intention to host a security dialogue on the responsible military use of emerging technologies. Several states have welcomed the initiative,³³ but Russia has opposed it, arguing that the FSC is not the appropriate forum. Instead, Moscow suggested that discussions of this kind are already held within the Group of Governmental Experts of the High Contracting Parties to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW), focusing on lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS) in Geneva.³⁴

If participating States aim to use the ‘Security Dialogue’ constructively, however, they could, for example, adapt the topic of emerging technologies by linking it to CSBMs and arms control, for example, especially by addressing their role in monitoring and verification. If there is no agreement on dedicated sessions on these topics, elements could be integrated into relevant conceptual notes on broader issues to facilitate consensus on the agenda. Additionally, Finland, as the OSCE chair, along with Switzerland, could already today begin consultations with consecutive FSC chairs in 2025 and 2026, which, besides Spain, include Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, and Greece. These consultations would aim to coordinate a series of focused ‘security dialogues’ on key politico-military issues while ensuring sufficient common ground to foster meaningful engagement within the FSC over the next two years.

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Reviving the “Structured Dialogue”

In parallel with such efforts, the Structured Dialogue can serve as a platform for subject-matter discussions at both working and diplomatic levels. Unlike informal groups, which often bring together only like-minded states, the Structured Dialogue benefits from a mandate issued by the 2016 Ministerial Council in Hamburg, formally supported by all 57 OSCE participating States. However, interpretations of this mandate remain contested. Some states advocate for a broad agenda, including hybrid warfare and general principles of conduct, emphasising the Ministerial Council’s call for dialogue on “current and future challenges and risks to security in the OSCE area.”³⁵ Others, particularly Russia and Belarus, stress a more limited interpretation, arguing that the Structured Dialogue should focus exclusively on future CSBM and arms control instruments.³⁶

This ongoing divide continues to shape the platform’s effectiveness and scope. In its first two years, from 2017 to 2018, the Structured Dialogue facilitated exchanges on military doctrines, threat perceptions, and CSBM reforms that lacked consensus in the FSC. However, interest in such debates has since waned. The Covid-19 pandemic further stalled momentum by preventing in-person meetings. Following the 2022 invasion, the Dialogue shifted to irregular small-group consultations, excluding Russia and Belarus. In 2022–2023, the Finnish chair used the platform to develop a website and app showcasing OSCE tools and measures.³⁷ While valuable for public awareness and promoting the OSCE as a useful platform, the next step must focus on identifying and integrating specific instruments that generate diplomatic synergies to address the current crisis.

To revive the Structured Dialogue for substantive discussions, participating States must agree on an agenda and prioritise key security issues. Norway, which recently was appointed Chair following the Netherlands, could reinvigorate the process by convening thematic conferences on topics like the impact of new military technologies on evolving doctrines. If formal meetings prove unfeasible, an initial or parallel approach could involve Track 1.5 or Track 2 workshops on CSBMs and arms control instruments. If initiated by Finland as the OSCE chair or Norway as the chair of the Structured Dialogue, insights from these workshops could later be introduced into state-led debates, ensuring broader engagement and expert input in shaping policies.

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Addressing evolving security concerns

Unlike the post-Cold War trust-building approach, future agreements must prioritise crisis communication, monitoring capacity, and verification to ensure confidence even without intrusive inspections.

Building momentum for political leadership and leveraging OSCE platforms for dialogue about CSBMs and arms control, however, is only part of the challenge. Existing instruments must be further developed to address real security concerns of OSCE participating States. In times of confrontation, they are only effective if they provide tangible benefits, support deterrence policies, and reduce risks thereof. They should enhance military predictability, prevent escalation, and ensure sufficient transparency of intentions and capabilities. Unlike the post-Cold War trust-building approach, when many saw CSBMs and arms control as fostering a “community of free and democratic nations from Vancouver to Vladivostok,”³⁸ future agreements must prioritise crisis communication, monitoring capacity, and verification to ensure confidence even without intrusive inspections and with clear consequences for non-compliance.

As they stand, existing CSBMs and arms control instruments fall short of these requirements. Little remains of the “web of interlocking and mutually reinforcing arms control obligations and commitments” envisioned in the 1990s.³⁹ The CFE Treaty, once the “cornerstone of European security,” has unravelled.⁴⁰ Final negotiations about its adaptation came to a halt over the Summer of 2011, but new military technologies beyond treaty-limited equipment (TLE) were never seriously addressed. Meanwhile, efforts to reform the Vienna Document 2011 have stalled. Since 2011, delegations have proposed over 100 amendments,⁴¹ of which only four minor ones have been integrated.⁴² The U.S. and Russia’s withdrawal from the Treaty on Open Skies, combined with advances in satellite imagery and unmanned aerial systems (UAS), has limited its usefulness. While the future of the CSBM and arms control framework remains thus uncertain, the war in Ukraine highlights key priorities for further development.

Lessons from the war

On the one hand, the war has reinforced the importance of traditional TLE categories, including battle tanks, armoured combat vehicles, and artillery, as both Russia and Ukraine have relied heavily on them.⁴³ The fact that Russia has been massively using equipment stored and stationed beyond the Ural Mountains also highlights the need to once again consider geographic scope when defining areas of application of future arms control measures that take readiness and reinforcement capabilities into account. On the other hand, both Russia and Ukraine have relied heavily on UAS that display increasingly autonomous functions.⁴⁴ These systems now play a crucial role in intelligence, surveillance, and target acquisition and reconnaissance (ISTAR), as well as combat operations, including deep strikes, counter-battery fire, and the suppression of air defences.

In addition, Russia has conducted an intensive campaign using long-range, precision strike (LRPS) capabilities, including a wide range of conventional ballistic and cruise missiles.⁴⁵ While integrating these weapon systems into future arms control frameworks requires an end to hostilities and appropriate diplomatic conditions, unilateral preparatory work and coordination among like-minded states, for example, between NATO allies to develop common perspectives on military and political needs, can start today. This includes clarifying how different weapons systems

relate to each other, whether they should be treated as separate categories, and, if so, how to define them. Laying this groundwork by defining strategic interests and force categories, which takes considerable time, is crucial for developing policy options that align with national interests.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, incidents and provocations between Russia and NATO members stress the need for improving crisis communication channels that go beyond ad hoc measures and function in times of peace and war. As the use of new military technology is also reshaping doctrines and operational thinking, these changes should be communicated through substantive exchanges among security professionals to enhance predictability. A similar requirement exists with regard to the growing scale and sophistication of military exercises, which have become essential for enhancing deterrence and improving and displaying readiness. Appropriate CSBMs can help to clarify strategic signalling and to reduce misperceptions. Finally, ending the war in Ukraine may require building up the capacity for ceasefire monitoring and coordinating possible peacekeeping forces. The OSCE cannot address all these challenges, but it can drive progress in key areas.

Advancing military-to-military communication

The deepening divide between Russia and Belarus and EU and NATO member states has increased military activity in the contact zone. Enduring geographic proximity and mutual deterrence policies, which will shape security dynamics for the foreseeable future, create incentives for provocations to signal resolve, heightening the risk of incidents and inadvertent escalation. Since 2022, numerous dangerous encounters have occurred. In September 2022, for example, a Russian Su-27 reportedly fired two missiles at an unarmed RAF RC-135 Rivet Joint surveillance aircraft in international airspace over the Black Sea. Russia claimed a malfunction, but intercepted communications suggest a pilot deliberately targeted it after an ambiguous ground command.⁴⁷ In March 2023, another Su-27 made two close passes at a U.S. MQ-9 Reaper UAS near Crimea, dumping fuel to blind its sensors before striking its propeller, prompting the U.S. Air Force to crash it into the Black Sea.⁴⁸

While real-time operational incidents like these are primarily managed, if at all, through bilateral channels, the OSCE can play a role in fostering military contacts, professional debriefings, and lower-level engagement. Routine military-to-military interactions with Russia and Belarus have become increasingly difficult, especially since NATO, with few exceptions,⁴⁹ suspended all practical civilian and military cooperation in March 2014 following Russia's annexation of Crimea. The remaining communication channels, including the Russian Mission at the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) and the NATO-Russia Council, were cut in early 2022. However, NATO has also stated its willingness to maintain channels with Moscow to mitigate risks and prevent escalation.⁵⁰ The OSCE can complement these efforts by supporting military-to-military contacts and crisis communication through existing mechanisms, including chapters III and IV of the Vienna Document 2011, the High-Level Military Doctrine Seminar (HLMDS), and meetings of the heads of verification centres.

Appropriate CSBMs can help to clarify strategic signalling and to reduce misperceptions.

Currently, however, all three formats are ineffective. The annual meetings of the heads of national verification centres have been suspended, though an informal conference of verification agencies took place in 2024 and 2025, but without Russian or Belarusian participation. Meanwhile, Chapter IV of the Vienna Document 2011, which includes provisions for obligatory (air bases) and voluntary military-to-military contacts, such as visits to military facilities, formations, and observations of certain military activities, has seen little use in recent years. Similarly, the consultation mechanisms under Chapter III, which grants concerned states the right to request and receive information on unusual military activities, exchange views in bilateral meetings, and convene special joint meetings of the Permanent Council and the FSC, have not been invoked since March 2022.

Looking ahead, the HLMDS is formally scheduled for early 2026, following its last iteration in February 2021. Since 2001, it has occurred every five years, though the Vienna Document 2011 encourages “periodic” organisation without limiting its frequency.⁵¹ Before 2001, OSCE participating States, for example, met in 1990, 1991, and 1998, while Austria hosted “intersessional dialogues” in 2017 and 2019, which could be institutionalised. The HLMDS’ length and content are flexible as well; in 2021, it spanned two days with sessions on operational trends, competition below the threshold of armed conflict, and crisis response.⁵² As Finland will be invited to the next HLMDS, it could highlight the role of LRPS in modern combat and related doctrinal shifts. These discussions could stimulate debates about broader arms control measures to be negotiated in the future.

Building capacity for ceasefire monitoring

While such long-term initiatives are vital, the OSCE may also need to address more immediate security concerns. If a ceasefire is reached in Ukraine, the organisation could play a key role in providing monitoring capacities to ensure compliance among the involved state parties. Coordinating future peacekeeping forces and enforcement tools would also be critical for maintaining stability and preventing renewed hostilities. In the past, the OSCE has already gained valuable experience in using UAS for monitoring tasks during the Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) in Eastern Ukraine from March 2014 to March 2022. The ad hoc organisation of the mission and its adaptation to new and changing requirements after violence had broken out in the Donbas, however, severely undermined its own capacity to deliver on the original mandate and engendered Ukrainian popular distrust.⁵³

As the former Principal Deputy Chief of the SMM, Alexander Hug, writes, “the expectation to enhance the Missions’ capacity, reach, and accuracy did neither allow for a thorough needs assessment nor a comparative study of the few civilian operations that had already deployed some technology for the monitoring and verifying of ceasefire agreements.”⁵⁴ In this context, the mission relied on third parties to operate long-range (200 kilometres) UAS, which were eventually acquired from and operated by the Austrian company Schiebel. For data analysis, particularly of imagery, however, the SMM drew on personnel that had to be provided in a comparatively short period of time by OSCE participating States, which, however, “could not recruit in the open market for

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OSCE participating States should start building relevant capacity by training civilian and military personnel and establishing clear rules of engagement in using UAS for aerial observation.

most of the required positions”.⁵⁵ Finding appropriate personnel and, if necessary, training people, as well as selecting respective companies to provide required services, became a major and time-consuming process.

Future ceasefire monitoring in Ukraine, however, would pose significantly greater challenges due to the vast relevant territory and complete lack of trust between involved parties. In contrast to the SMM, any deployment of personnel would also require a significant force protection element. As a result, ad hoc measures will be insufficient. Hence, while considering political sensitivities, OSCE participating States should start building relevant capacity by training civilian and military personnel and establishing clear rules of engagement in using UAS for aerial observation. Moreover, when the time is right, they could build upon in-house capacity by tasking the Operations Service of the Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC), which, among others, is responsible for the deployment and dismantling of OSCE field missions, with developing a clear conceptual framework and strategy for future monitoring tasks based on lessons learned from the SMM.

As part of such a framework, OSCE participating States could also leverage the Treaty on Open Skies, using available aircraft instead of UAS. Despite the withdrawal of Russia and the United States, the technical infrastructure and operational expertise remain intact and usable outside the Treaty framework. In November 2022, Germany and Romania certified two new aircraft with four-color digital optical cameras and near-infrared sensors.⁵⁶ The German aircraft could theoretically also be fitted with thermal radar and, possibly, radar sensors, enabling night and all-weather operations. Real-time processing of digital data enables the verification of information both during the flight and immediately afterwards. Alongside two former Russian Open Skies aircraft, both equipped with digital optical sensors and previously certified for Treaty use,⁵⁷ at least four operational platforms remain available.⁵⁸ These aircraft offer several advantages, including flight ranges of thousands of kilometres and sensors capable of covering a ground swathe of several dozen kilometres.

Most importantly, unlike UAS, they would allow military officers from multiple state parties to be physically present on board, facilitating direct observation and verification of overflights. This human element is particularly valuable in the low-trust relationship between Russia and Ukraine and could help to reduce disputes over flight routes and data authenticity. In addition, the Treaty’s established, verifiable chain of custody for sensor data, which has been previously agreed upon by member states, can enhance confidence among state parties, offering a level of transparency that is not provided by standard military reconnaissance flights. This framework could facilitate deploying Open Skies aircraft from neutral states, such as non-treaty members Austria or Switzerland, to conduct overflights with international crews along a fixed line of contact.

Another option to enhance monitoring capacity would be allowing the OSCE to directly rent or borrow time on commercial earth observation satellites and access relevant imagery. However, this would require sufficient analytical capacity, potentially coordinated through a dedicated OSCE hub. During the SMM, the OSCE primarily relied on satellite imagery and analysis acquired from the European

Union Satellite Centre,⁵⁹ which draws from both commercial and governmental sources,⁶⁰ and some imagery provided directly by France and Germany.⁶¹ These products enabled cross-time comparisons of disengagement areas and broader monitoring of the Russia-Ukraine border.⁶² According to Hug, however, the SMM was cautious about accepting imagery from individual OSCE participating States, ensuring that the mission itself defined the area and timeline covered to safeguard its independence.⁶³ In the present confrontational climate, maintaining independence and preventing image manipulation are especially relevant for preserving impartiality. With proper transparency measures, unclassified, shareable commercial imagery could support these efforts.

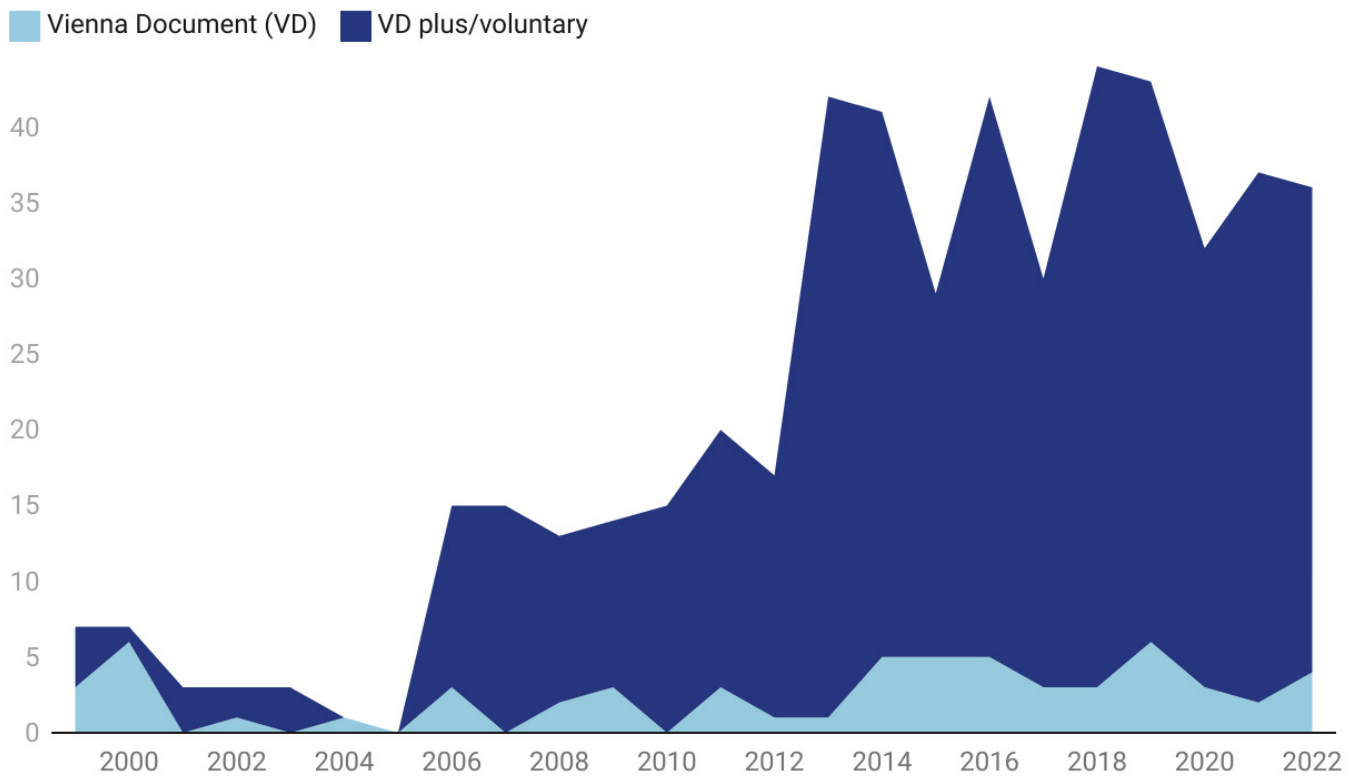
Rethinking CSBMs for military activities

Expanding monitoring capabilities can help to address near term requirements in Ukraine, but the shift from cooperation to confrontation in the OSCE area also necessitates a more principled re-evaluation of CSBMs for notification and observing military exercises. In particular, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has reinforced concerns about the use of routine but also unusual military activities as preparations for conducting large-scale, offensive combat operations. Whereas prominent during the Cold War, these concerns have become less important in the post-Cold War period, at least until 2014. During this time, the focus of armed forces shifted from territorial defence to multinational expeditionary missions. As defence budgets declined, activities became less frequent and much smaller in scale, including, among others, computer-assisted command and staff exercises.

Accordingly, the conditions for mandatory notifications and observations of activities, as specified in chapters V and VI of the Vienna Document 2011, were increasingly no longer applicable, as exercises did not reach the required thresholds. They include, among others, 9,000 troops for notifications and 13,000 troops for observations. Numerous proposals introduced in working group A of the FSC to lower these thresholds have not found consensus, however. As a result, the number of notifications plummeted. Instead, since 2005, the great majority of all Vienna Document notifications have been voluntary,⁶⁴ or are based on the Vienna Document plus decision No. 9/12 – a decision by the FSC from October 2012, that requires OSCE participating States to notify one major military exercise or activity below the threshold in the absence of any notifiable exercise or activity.⁶⁵

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has reinforced concerns about the use of routine but also unusual military activities as preparations for conducting large-scale, offensive combat operations.

Figure 2: Notifications of Military Activities according to the Vienna Document Chapter V, and voluntary notifications, as well as those based on Vienna Document plus decision No. 9/12, 1999 to 2022.



Created with Datawrapper

Source: Annual Disarmament Reports (Jahresabrüstungsberichte) of the Federal German Government

Transparency must not only foster trust but also serve as a mechanism for enhancing deterrence and geopolitical signalling.

In addition, under conditions of cooperative security, the practice of inspections, at least for some participating States, evolved into a fair-weather instrument. It came to rely on a leap of faith in the inspected partner state's trustworthiness rather than serving as a tool for building confidence in peaceful intentions through rigorous scrutiny. In the future, this mindset must change. Transparency must not only foster trust but also serve as a mechanism for enhancing deterrence and geopolitical signalling. As Supreme Allied Commander in Europe (SACEUR) General Christopher G. Cavoli rightly states, the "ability to deter is a function of demonstrated readiness," which is why armed forces "need to exercise".⁶⁶ Fulfilling this function, however, requires designing exercises and corresponding CSBMs that effectively convey specific signals to potential adversaries when observing activities.

Although the size and number of military activities among OSCE participating States has once again increased in recent years, rendering the existing thresholds of the Vienna Document 2011 less problematic, many exercises today are conducted across borders, involving multiple NATO members as well as joint operations between Russia and Belarus. The Vienna Document 2011, however, essentially assumes the organisation of exercises in one state and requires only the participating State on whose territory an activity takes place to provide a notification. In addition, notifiable exercises

are supposed to be conducted as a “single activity” and under a “single operational command”.⁶⁷ In reality, however, manoeuvres, even when they belong to one single cross-border multinational exercise but take place in one state (and purposefully so), frequently do not reach the respective thresholds for notification or observation.

Consequently, if OSCE participating States want to use CSBMs to send meaningful signals, increase confidence in the predictability of military action, and demonstrate capabilities, especially when conducting large-scale reinforcement exercises, they should address and adapt the respective paragraphs in the Vienna Document 2011. In this case, they should also make sure that observations take place at adequate echelons and levels of complexity, for example, by conducting combined armed exercises at the brigade or even division level. In this context, technological means can be helpful in striking the right balance between transparency and operational security. Using live video footage from small UAS, for example, when organised by the inviting party, can provide inspectors with a fuller situational picture but without access to sensitive sites.

Technological means can be helpful in striking the right balance between transparency and operational security.

Recommendations

1. US allies in Europe should use the OSCE as a platform to ensure that any diplomatic process toward ending the war in Ukraine evolves in a coordinated way, considers their interests, and, embeds bilateral efforts of the United States and Russia in a larger pan-European framework. Such initiative can encourage buy-in by third parties and create creative, long-term solutions addressing the underlying issues of the war
2. The OSCE Troika should develop a unified and comprehensive agenda for advancing dialogue on CSBMs and arms control instruments in 2025 and 2026. In cooperation with the respective FSC chairs, they could coordinate the organisation of a series of security dialogues in the FSC on particular issues on the politico-military agenda while making sure to establish sufficient common ground among participating States;
3. OSCE participating States should begin strengthening their capacity for future ceasefire monitoring tasks, establishing robust oversight mechanisms and incorporating effective force protection measures. This includes training civilian and military personnel and developing clear rules of engagement for using UAS in aerial observation. National verification centres and units should be adapted, and, possibly, even expanded, to meet these evolving challenges rather than downsized;
4. OSCE participating States should recognise that under conditions of confrontation, military transparency primarily serves purposes of confidence-building about peaceful intentions and capacities. Such a mindset is also relevant for adapting existing and developing new CSBMs, including but not limited to the Vienna Document. When designing exercises and planning observation visits, they should focus on demonstrating readiness and providing sufficient information to enhance predictability and deterrence;
5. OSCE participating States should start laying the groundwork for future arms control measures by defining their own strategic interests and relevant force categories in order to develop policy options that align with national interests. This could include clarifying how different weapons systems relate to each other, whether they should be treated as separate categories, and if, so, how to define them. Participating States could use the HLMDS in early 2026 to stimulate discussions about LRPS capabilities and the effects of using UAS on military doctrines.

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