EUROPEAN LEADERSHIP NETWORK

Assessing the OSCE Toolbox: Opportunities for a safer Europe

Report

Katia Glod

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About the Author

Katia Glod
Former ELN Policy Fellow

Katia Glod is an expert on Eurasia, specialising in foreign policy and international security. She is also a member of the Organisation for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Expert Network and a Non-resident Fellow at the Centre for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), Washington.

Katia has worked in research and business as a political analyst. At the ELN she worked as a Policy Fellow where she led projects on Russia-West relations. Katia also worked as a consultant for Amnesty International and the European Endowment for Democracy as well as an election observer and analyst for the OSCE. Earlier, Katia was a Robert Bosch Academy Fellow on the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House in London.

Her expertise is frequently sought by international media, and she has provided analysis for BBC, Euronews, Sky News, Associated Press, the Financial Times, and other global outlets.

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Executive summary

Over its nearly 50 years of existence, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has developed a wide-ranging set of tools to address security challenges across its region. These tools span the political-military, economic-environmental, and human dimensions of security, based on the OSCE's comprehensive concept of what security is. They have been used to prevent conflict, enhance political and military transparency, foster trust-building, and support peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts.

However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and its full-scale war in 2022 have dismantled Europe's existing security architecture, which had been underpinned by OSCE commitments undertaken by participating States in 1975. As a result, many OSCE tools, particularly those in the politico-military domain, have been rendered ineffective.

Beyond geopolitical disruptions, the effectiveness of the OSCE Toolbox has also been constrained by several internal factors, including the lack of political will among some participating States to fully utilise these tools, the constraints of consensus-based decision-making, and resource limitations. These challenges have further weakened the OSCE's ability to act decisively in times of crisis.

Nevertheless, a potential resurgence of political commitment could reinvigorate the OSCE's tools, enabling them to be adapted to current challenges and once again serve their intended purpose. Some tools have remained relevant and continue to offer significant value; these should be fully utilised and strengthened where possible.

Most importantly, OSCE tools need to be used flexibly, often in combination, depending on the specific needs of a given situation.

What is the OSCE's value-added?

- The OSCE continues to serve as a platform for dialogue among adversarial states, maintaining critical communication channels even amid heightened tensions;

- Smaller structure and regional focus enable it to react swiftly to emerging crises;

- Field operations implement initiatives directly on the ground, fostering trust among stakeholders;

- Politico-military tools, such as the **Vienna Document** and the **Forum for Security Co-operation (FSC)**, have played a key role in military transparency and risk reduction. They must be maintained, and the adherence to them advocated;

- The OSCE's **Early Warning Mechanism** remains an essential tool for conflict prevention, though its effectiveness is hampered by the lack of enforcement mechanisms.

- Human dimension tools, particularly those under the **Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)**, have continued to provide valuable monitoring and reporting functions but often face resistance from participating States.

OSCE tools have been used to prevent conflict, enhance political and military transparency, foster trust-building, and support peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts.

OSCE Toolbox

This report highlights the following issues that affect the effectiveness of the toolbox:

- **Dependence on political will.** The effectiveness of most tools is contingent on the willingness of states to engage constructively. When political tensions rise, the usability of OSCE mechanisms declines.

- **Variability in implementation.** Some mechanisms, such as election observation missions, continue to function effectively, while others, like arms control measures, have weakened due to changing geopolitical realities.

- **Lack of enforcement mechanisms.** Many OSCE tools rely on voluntary compliance, reducing their impact. Without binding mechanisms, participating states can disregard agreements without facing significant consequences.

- **Resource constraints.** Limited funding and administrative capacity hinder the full implementation of OSCE tools, particularly in conflict prevention and peacebuilding efforts.

- **Rigidity of consensus-based decision-making.** While ensuring inclusivity, the requirement for unanimity among all participating states frequently delays or prevents action on urgent security matters.

- **Adaptation to emerging threats.** While traditional security issues remain relevant, OSCE tools must be updated to address modern challenges, such as cyber threats, hybrid warfare, and disinformation campaigns.

- **Challenges in field mission deployment.** Political, bureaucratic and logistical obstacles often delay or prevent OSCE's rapid response to emerging crises, limiting its effectiveness in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

Key recommendations

- **Modernise tools**

Update OSCE instruments to address contemporary security challenges more effectively, integrating modern technology in areas like cybersecurity, unmanned systems, and space-related security technologies.

- **Enhance legal framework and compliance**

Support recommendations from OSCE assessment and fact-finding missions, legal reviews, and opinions with robust mechanisms that can help ensure their implementation, particularly in states lacking the political will or capacity to adopt reforms independently.

- **Enhance transparency and communication**

Improve transparency in military activities and communication between OSCE states through more robust verification and reporting systems to ensure data accuracy and timeliness.

- **Revamp engagement formats**

Adopt innovative engagement formats, such as combining formal plenary sessions with smaller, focused workshops, to enhance dialogue and consensus-building among participating states.

- **Enhance capacity-building**

Strengthen the capacity of participating states by investing in training and resources to bolster local early warning, conflict prevention, and crisis management efforts.

- **Enhance inter-agency cooperation**

Improve coordination with other international and regional organisations, such as the UN and EU, to amplify the OSCE's impact, avoid duplication of efforts, and strengthen the collective security framework.

- **Strengthen early warning mechanisms**

Improve early warning mechanisms by introducing more informal and regular discussions and granting greater autonomy to the Conflict Prevention Centre for independent assessments and recommendations.

- **Strengthen conflict prevention mechanisms**

Enhance the autonomy of the Conflict Prevention Centre to conduct independent assessments and provide timely recommendations directly to the Permanent Council to improve response speed and effectiveness.

- **Maintain focus on the human dimension**

Sustain engagement with civil society and prioritise regular assessments of initiatives to identify impactful areas, ensuring that human rights, rule of law, and democracy remain central to OSCE's comprehensive security framework.

Introduction

The OSCE is unique in the Euro-Atlantic security architecture in that it includes all the countries of the area, who have agreed to participate on the basis of a comprehensive concept of security spanning political-military, economic-environmental and human dimensions. Like many international organisations, its practical functioning often falls short of its lofty goals, and much of its good work is done at local and "micro" levels. Its broad geographical reach enables the Organisation to tailor responses to specific conflict risks, such as water disputes in Central Asia or democratisation and rehabilitation efforts in the Western Balkans.

Through its extensive network of field missions and offices, the OSCE implements programmes directly on the ground across its region. These missions engage local stakeholders, including governments and civil society, fostering trust and enhancing the legitimacy and sustainability of initiatives. Unlike larger organisations with rigid structures, the OSCE's smaller size and regional focus allow it to adapt quickly to emerging challenges. This flexibility enables the Organisation to pilot innovative solutions and respond swiftly to evolving risks.

The OSCE also complements the work of other global and regional organisations, such as the UN, World Bank, Council of Europe and European Union. By supporting the review of international commitments and assisting participating States in implementing agreements, it strengthens multilateral efforts. Moreover, the OSCE mobilises expertise and resources from partner organisations to help States fulfil their obligations effectively.

With its comprehensive toolkit and adaptive capabilities, the OSCE has the means to address a wide array of security challenges. However, its success depends on the political will of participating States and sufficient resources to leverage its instruments effectively. The toolkit for conflict was largely shaped as the Euro-Atlantic area emerged from the Cold War, and in the current environment of renewed Russia-West confrontation, central decision-making in Vienna is frequently paralysed, not least because the organisation relies on a consensus decision-making procedure and consensus is often lacking.

Experts generally suggested that large-scale adaptation of OSCE tools, or the creation of new tools, is unlikely to be feasible in the current geopolitical environment. The organisation's commitment to inclusivity and consensus is central to its founding principles and identity, but can also leave it hamstrung and in search of workarounds during times of active confrontation between major member states. Instruments for conflict management, risk reduction, early warning and the prevention of further horizontal and vertical conflict escalation are particularly critical in this context, while confidence-building measures may be drawn on more at a later stage.

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Six Top Priority Tools: selected by the author on the basis of uniqueness and added value

Vienna Document (Military Transparency Mechanism)

- **Why it is unique:** One of the longest-running and most detailed military transparency agreements, promoting risk reduction.

- **Value:** Enhances military predictability by requiring OSCE states to notify each other of military activities, reducing the risk of miscalculation.

- **Notable use:** Ukraine invoked its risk reduction measures in 2014 and 2022 to demand explanations of Russian troop movements.

OSCE Forum for Security Co-operation (FSC)

- **Why it is unique:** One of the last remaining platforms for military dialogue between adversaries. It provides an arms control framework even when formal treaties collapse.

- **Value:** Ensures regular updates and modernisation of key arms control and CBM agreements that many states still rely on for military predictability.

- **Notable use:** Can be a venue for risk-reduction communications between Russia and NATO members.

OSCE Cyber Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs)

- **Why it is unique:** One of the few diplomatic frameworks designed to prevent cyber conflicts between states.

- **Value:** Establishes trust and dialogue between states on cybersecurity, helping to reduce the risks of cyber-related escalations.

- **Notable use:** A rare OSCE working group that continues to function despite geopolitical tensions.

High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM)

- **Why it is unique:** One of the few international tools specifically designed for preventive diplomacy related to minority tensions.

- **Value:** Helps de-escalate potential conflicts related to ethnic and national minority issues before they turn violent.

- **Notable use:** Played a major role in mediating ethnic tensions in the Baltics and the Balkans.

OSCE Early Warning Mechanism

- **Why it is unique:** Unlike many international organisations, the OSCE has a dedicated mechanism for anticipating conflicts rather than just reacting to them.

- **Value:** Uses intelligence-gathering, diplomatic monitoring, and field missions to identify risks before they escalate into violence.

- **Notable use:** Successfully identified tensions in Kyrgyzstan (2010) and Ukraine (2014), although political limitations affected response speed.

Moscow Mechanism

- **Why it is unique:** One of the few OSCE tools that allows independent fact-finding missions on human rights violations without the consent of the accused state.

- **Value:** Provides an impartial, expert-driven assessment of human rights concerns, crucial for international accountability.

The OSCE Toolbox

What is the OSCE Toolbox? It is a dynamic repository of the Organisation's mechanisms, agreements and expertise – a living library that continues to evolve. Its potential remains underutilised, and many (even within the OSCE staff and participating State delegations) are not familiar with its full scope. Nonetheless, the toolbox offers an invaluable collection of resources that reflect the breadth of the OSCE's work over the past five decades.

This ecosystem includes examples of global significance, such as the OSCE's comprehensive work on small arms and light weapons, which provides a rich library of handbooks and best practice guides recognised internationally. Other components, though less well-known, hold significant potential to generate insights and inform future initiatives. The toolbox spans everything from foundational agreements like the Helsinki Final Act to commitments addressing modern challenges such as cybersecurity and risks stemming from information and communication technologies.

Far from being a static archive, the OSCE Toolbox encapsulates the expertise and efforts of some of the finest minds in the OSCE area, offering a resource that can inspire innovative approaches and solutions to contemporary challenges. It is not merely a collection of documents but a testament to decades of international collaboration and expertise that continues to offer lessons for the global community.

The European Leadership Network has conducted extensive interviews with former OSCE officials, government representatives, security experts, civil society actors and individuals from across generations to gain insights into the OSCE's work and its Toolbox. The breadth and complexity of the Toolbox presented a significant challenge when attempting a comprehensive assessment, as few interlocutors appeared to possess a complete understanding of the Organisation's wide array of tools and activities. This report is primarily based on the Toolbox[1] definitions developed by Finland, though it points to some other areas where tools can be identified.

This report seeks to address that gap by strengthening awareness of the scope and potential of the OSCE Toolbox. It aims to provide a foundation for further research to evaluate the Toolbox in greater depth. Additionally, the report identifies the tools deemed most critical and practical for tackling contemporary challenges, particularly in post-conflict environments.

The research findings reveal both the strengths and challenges of the OSCE Toolbox. Its ad hoc nature, while sometimes seen as a limitation, reflects an internal logic, as the Toolbox has evolved organically over the past 50 years to address shifting security challenges – some more successfully than others. This adaptability underscores its ability to respond to a wide range of issues.

Certain tools and concepts within the Toolbox have remained relevant, while others have lost their practical currency. For instance, the OSCE's unique expertise with confidence-building measures continues to stand out as a valuable asset. With vision and the application of sufficient resources (a perennial constraint on OSCE work), these mechanisms, or more accurately, the structures and ideas behind them, can be applied across different dimensions effectively.

> **The OSCE's unique expertise with confidence-building measures continues to stand out as a valuable asset.**

In practice, the OSCE's approach to any conflict usually combines mixing and matching existing tools with flexibility. Both the selection and effectiveness of these tools are subject to the specific needs of the situation.

The instruments in the Toolbox are classified according to the four stages of the OSCE conflict cycle – early warning, conflict prevention, crisis management, and post-conflict. This categorisation may be helpful when focusing on a particular conflict phase, although most of the tools can be used at several stages of conflict. The tools can be further divided according to which problem they purport to solve (e.g. risk reduction) as well as based on their principal function (e.g. setting norms, promoting dialogue and exchanging information, or initiating processes).

However, for clarity, the tools below have been allocated into one of the six categories specified in the printed version of the OSCE Toolbox (see Annex):

- Pol-mil tools

- OSCE-mandated mechanisms

- OSCE early warning

- Short-term deployments

- Peace/Field Operations

- General tools.

Most conflict-cycle tools (not just on the part of the OSCE) are successful when the parties to the conflict are still potentially open to de-escalation or when they have become fatigued and want a way out. For example, tools that offer expertise, capacity-building, information, etc, are useful when the obstacles to peace stem from a lack of understanding, misunderstanding or miscalculation. Mediation can also be useful to open up diplomatic routes for the settlement of specific grievances if there is at least some willingness to explore these. OSCE work on conflicts will usually use multiple tools. The tools can be applied in different combinations; in different cases, they can have different functions. For example, OSCE "*fact-finding*" may also have a mediation function.

The OSCE's toolbox is both impressive and extensive. It is not necessarily easy for states to navigate, especially when diplomats are looking from capitals. This report is intended to contribute to better understanding.

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Political-military Tools

Politico-military tools listed in the OSCE Toolbox roughly fall within the following three categories:

- Principles: the foundation of the OSCE. They are commitments that OSCE has undertaken and can be held accountable for.

- Mechanisms: processes that can be initiated within the OSCE with a specific intention;

- Platforms: forums and meetings for dialogue and exchange of information.

Framework for Arms Control

Stabilising Measures for Localised Crisis Situations

The Stabilising Measures document aims to assist in identifying and implementing temporary measures that can facilitate the political process and provide stability during localised crisis situations. It constitutes a menu of broad options that need to be fleshed out in detail in order to be applied to any crisis in practice.[2] Several of them overlap with the Vienna document.[3] Written in 1992, the measures were seen at the time as a "new generation" of CBMs, but some provisions were left deliberately ambiguous because Russia wanted to avoid placing restrictions on Russian 'peacekeeping' in its 'near abroad'.[4]

Potential stabilising measures outlined by the document include: extraordinary information exchange; introduction and support of a cease-fire; the establishment of demilitarised zones; deactivation of weapons systems, especially heavy weapons, and arms storage under OSCE supervision; and observation of compliance with demilitarised zones.

Not all of the measures are to be taken by the OSCE; some are for parties to the conflict to undertake, and some are for third parties (who may include OSCE member states), but they could be recommended, encouraged and monitored by the OSCE. For example, the measures include the use of public statements *by the parties to a conflict*, such as making public commitments to give access to international humanitarian organisations, and conversely to refrain from making public statements that would be inflammatory or escalatory.

Assessment

The selection of measures could usefully be expanded to give more consideration to non-military measures, including tools from the second and third dimensions (for instance, implementing humanitarian access and prisoner swaps).

Since its adoption, the document has informed and inspired the creation and composition of a number of OSCE missions and agreements. For example, versions of these measures have been employed during the conflicts in the Balkans, Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, and in the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine.

Examples of use:

- During the post-Yugoslav wars, OSCE monitoring of local ceasefires and related measures proved instrumental in de-escalating conflicts and facilitating peace talks.

- In the South Caucasus, temporary agreements supported by OSCE observers allowed humanitarian convoys safe passage.

- In eastern Ukraine, while the measures helped track ceasefire violations, there was no larger political or military mechanism to enforce compliance or prevent repeated escalations.

Recommendations

As with most of the OSCE tools, the measures require buy-in from all stakeholders. If one party is unwilling to cooperate, implementation becomes difficult. Trust-building between parties is, therefore, a critical component of success.

Stabilising measures must be accompanied by sustained political dialogue to address underlying issues. Without this, the measures often serve as a temporary band-aid rather than a permanent solution.

Stabilising measures should be complemented by other OSCE tools that help to address the root causes of instability, such as inclusive political dialogue, governance reforms, and economic recovery programmes. For example, structured mediation processes can build trust and consensus among stakeholders, while economic initiatives, such as SME support in Kosovo, create jobs and reduce grievances. Governance reforms, like anti-corruption efforts in South-Eastern Europe, enhance institutional trust. Similarly, civil society engagement fosters local ownership and social cohesion, as seen in reconciliation initiatives in the Balkans. Gender and youth inclusion, exemplified by Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) plans and education campaigns, such as OSCE's media literacy projects in Central Asia, further strengthen peacebuilding. OSCE field missions can combine these tools with robust monitoring.

In an increasingly digital world, measures addressing cybersecurity and online conflict prevention are also crucial. Monitoring and countering online hate speech, alongside digital inclusion programmes, help prevent the escalation of tensions in fragile settings, as seen in the OSCE's media literacy initiatives in the South Caucasus.

Treaty on Open Skies

Although not legally under the OSCE framework, the Open Skies Treaty (OST) aligns with the OSCE principles – a verification tool, requiring cooperation between countries, which allows unarmed aerial surveillance flights over the territories of the signatory states. In 2020, the United States withdrew, with Russia following suit in 2021. While the treaty still technically exists, the withdrawal of the U.S. and Russia has significantly diminished its scope.

Stabilising measures must be accompanied by sustained political dialogue to address underlying issues.

Assessment

The asset of the Treaty is its breadth of coverage. It allows observation flights from North America to the Kamchatka Peninsula in the Far East, and over the entire territory of each participating State, including land, airspace and islands under its control. No zones can be declared off-limits, except for safety-related restrictions, such as bad weather.

The treaty has been especially valuable for smaller states that may lack access to high-tech surveillance equipment or satellites. OS worked well from its entry into force in 2002 until the late 2010s, facilitating over 530 observation flights and enhancing mutual understanding among the signatory states by providing transparent data and by requiring working-level cooperation.

The Treaty's official website still functions, but flights are now limited to Georgia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. One of the main challenges is the lack of available certified aircraft.

Recommendations

There are ongoing debates about whether, or to what extent, the Treaty is still of value in light of modern technologies.

Satellite imagery and other advanced surveillance systems could potentially replace the need for costly Open Skies flights. The lessons learned from the OST experience can be usefully applied to future cooperative aerial monitoring arrangements.

Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE) and the Adapted CFE

The CFE Treaty was the most successful conventional arms control agreement in history. Signed in 1990, it created equal ceilings of major conventional weapons systems between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. It divided Europe into four concentric zones centred on Germany with varying force posture limits, including a special zone covering the border areas of the Soviet Union, Turkey and Norway, the so-called flanks. This structure aimed to limit the ability for large-scale, conventional surprise attacks. For NATO members, in particular, the much higher reduction requirements for the Warsaw Pact strengthened conventional deterrence and reduced reliance on nuclear escalation in case of war. In terms of alliance politics, the negotiation process as such also helped to defeat political calls for unilateral reductions.

Assessment

In the 1990s, the treaty eliminated more than 70,000 pieces of major treaty-limited equipment (TLE) across Europe, including battle tanks, armoured combat vehicles, artillery, combat aircraft, and attack helicopters. It also established a stringent transparency and verification regime, including exchanging military information about holdings and different forms of on-site inspections in the area of application – from the Atlantic to the Urals. In the 1992 CFE 1A agreement, member States furthermore agreed to create individual, politically binding limits for military personnel based on land.

The changing geopolitical situation following the demise of the Soviet Union and the decision in favour of NATO enlargement rendered the CFE Treaty's basic structure anachronistic. In November 1999, at the OSCE Istanbul Summit, member states, after three years of negotiations, signed the adapted CFE Treaty. It dissolved the pre-existing, concentric geographical zones and established national and territorial ceilings instead. It also adapted and improved the information and inspection mechanisms, opened the Treaty to all OSCE participating States and explicitly established host nation consent requirements for the deployment of foreign troops.

The adapted CFE Treaty, however, never went into force. While Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine eventually ratified the Treaty, NATO members insisted that Russia first had to remove all its troops and military infrastructure from Moldova and Georgia. The political conflict about implementing these so-called Istanbul commitments was never solved. In response, in December 2007, Russia suspended the implementation of the CFE Treaty but continued to participate in meetings of the Joint Consultative Group. Renewed attempts to bring the ACFE into force and negotiate the future of the conventional arms control regime in 2010 and 2011 ultimately failed to produce a compromise. Subsequently, NATO members stopped implementing the CFE Treaty in relation to Russia as well.

In March 2015, Russia also left the Joint Consultative Group but continued to be indirectly represented by Belarus. Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia in May 2023 initiated the domestic withdrawal procedure from the Treaty. On November 7, 2023, the withdrawal decision came into force. In response, NATO members decided to suspend the Treaty. Belarus followed suit in May 2024. This development has effectively ended the post-Cold War conventional arms control regime in Europe.

Nevertheless, the CFE Treaty has been historically a great success. It contributed significantly to the demilitarisation of Europe after the end of the Cold War and resulted in greater stability and mutual confidence through ceilings, inspections and exchanges of information among the state parties.

Recommendations

Experts expressed different views on whether the treaty can and should be preserved and potentially revived in the future. The treaty has four major elements: limits, operational constraints, information exchange, inspections/compliance and verification. The limits and the operational constraints are currently largely irrelevant, but the information exchange and the inspections would be worth preserving.

Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security

The Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security (CoC) is a cornerstone document designed to ensure transparency, accountability and democratic oversight of military and security forces in participating States. It extends and operationalises the principles outlined in earlier frameworks, such as the Helsinki Final Act (HFA) and the Paris Charter, emphasising respect for human rights, the rule of law and civilian control over armed forces. However, as the security landscape has evolved significantly since 1994, when the CoC was adopted, the CoC must adapt to address emerging challenges and ensure continued relevance.

Assessment

While the CoC does not mandate enforcement mechanisms, it (at a minimum) promotes transparency and can potentially do more. According to one former senior official, it "establishes channels of contact and communication between States", which is important for crisis management, even if broader cooperation remains elusive. Before 2022, the OSCE organised workshops to promote awareness and implementation of the CoC. The annual Forum for Security Co-operation discussions on the implementation of the CoC was not held in 2022-2024.

The CoC issue-specific supplementary questionnaires, including those on WPS or climate, are commendable initiatives that promote transparency, accountability, and adherence to global commitments among participating states, and are said to be unique in bringing in aspects of the human dimension and environmental and economic dimensions into the exchanges of military information.

Key strengths include their ability to highlight critical thematic issues, encourage transparency, and facilitate peer learning. The modular and adaptable nature of the questionnaires allows them to address region-specific challenges effectively.

However, their effectiveness is hindered by several limitations. The quality of responses can vary widely, with some states offering superficial answers due to resource constraints or lack of political will. Moreover, the OSCE's limited enforcement mechanisms and lack of systematic follow-up reduce the potential for these questionnaires to drive meaningful change. Smaller or less developed states may also face difficulties in providing comprehensive data, leading to imbalances in reporting.

Recommendations

The CoC can remain relevant if it is leveraged to promote dialogue in areas less affected by geopolitical tensions. For instance, engaging in workshops or other initiatives focused on human rights and gender equality within armed forces could revive its relevance while fostering incremental trust among participating states.

To enhance their impact, the OSCE could strengthen monitoring and evaluation through independent audits and introduce clear benchmarks for objective assessment. Providing technical support and capacity-building initiatives would help less-resourced states

The CoC must adapt to address emerging challenges and ensure continued relevance.

improve their reporting. Publishing aggregated findings, integrating civil society input, and leveraging technology could further improve transparency and effectiveness.

Elements that remain relevant:

- Democratic control of armed forces:
    - Ensuring civilian oversight of military forces and maintaining constitutional governance are as critical today as in 1994, especially in the face of resurgent authoritarianism and political instability.

    - The principle of public accountability for defence and security policies remains vital for trust and transparency.

- Respect for human rights and International humanitarian law:
    - Upholding human rights during armed conflict and ensuring the lawful conduct of security forces remain indispensable in addressing contemporary conflicts and hybrid warfare.

- Inter-state relations and territorial integrity:
    - The commitment to resolve disputes peacefully and respect sovereignty and territorial integrity is essential in light of ongoing conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine and other regional disputes.

- Arms control and transparency:
    - The principles of arms control, disarmament, and military transparency are still vital for preventing arms races and building trust among states.

    - In an era of growing military expenditures and advanced weaponry, these measures remain a cornerstone of collective security.

- Conflict prevention and peaceful resolution:
    - Early warning and dialogue mechanisms for conflict prevention are increasingly relevant as states face complex crises involving state and non-state actors.

Elements that need reassessment:

- Limited focus on non-traditional security challenges:
    - Issues like cybersecurity, climate change, and health security (e.g., pandemics) are inadequately covered in the original CoC despite their growing impact on global stability.

- Gender and inclusivity:
    - While the CoC promotes non-discrimination, it needs stronger commitments to Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) principles and broader inclusivity in security governance.

- Enforcement mechanisms:
    - Like most OSCE tools, the CoC lacks robust mechanisms to enforce compliance or address violations effectively.

Expert comment

"While some elements of the CoC remain relevant, others may need to be 'cherry-picked' and adapted to contemporary needs."

Global Exchange of Military Information

The OSCE Global Exchange of Military Information (GEMI), established in 1994, is a critical confidence-building measure aimed at fostering transparency and trust among participating States. Under this mechanism, all 57 OSCE members are required to exchange annual information about the size, structure, and key components of their military forces. This includes data on personnel strength, major weapon systems, and the locations and functions of units and formations.

Assessment

GEMI has played a significant role in promoting military transparency, particularly in the post-Cold War era, by institutionalising the exchange of standardised data, reducing the risks of miscalculation, and ensuring smaller or neutral states have access to information on the military capabilities of larger powers. Its geographical scope is wider than the Vienna Document.

Despite its value, GEMI faces several shortcomings. One of its major challenges is the lack of full compliance by some states. For example, strained relations between Russia and NATO countries have undermined trust in the process, with some states viewing GEMI as one-sided or failing to submit accurate information. Compounding this issue is the absence of enforcement mechanisms within the OSCE framework, leaving the system reliant on voluntary compliance.

Additionally, GEMI's reporting requirements have not kept pace with modern military developments, such as the rise of cyber capabilities, unmanned systems, and space-related security technologies.

Recommendations

To enhance its effectiveness, GEMI needs modernisation to address the challenges of the current security environment. Reporting requirements should be expanded to include emerging domains such as cyber and space capabilities and new military technologies like drones and artificial intelligence.

Strengthened verification mechanisms, such as independent audits or inspections, could improve the reliability of submitted data, although such measures would need to be carefully designed to respect political sensitivities.

Better integration with other OSCE confidence- and security-building measures, such as the Vienna Document, would streamline processes and reduce redundancy, creating a more cohesive framework for transparency.

Additionally, the OSCE could reinvigorate participation by fostering dialogue on GEMI's benefits and adapting it to address specific regional security concerns, thereby increasing its relevance for participating States.

Vienna Document

The Vienna Document (VD) is a unique instrument that provides for greater military transparency and communications in order to build confidence, assess intent, and reduce the risks of miscommunication and miscalculation. It is the main surviving element of the arms control architecture established in the Euro-Atlantic Area at the end of the Cold War.

It is based on confidence- and security-building measures first set out in the Helsinki Final Act, which have been functioning most of the time for the past five decades. The Document was first adopted in 1990 and is updated periodically (most recently in 2011). It primarily covers land forces, with some provisions for combat aircraft and helicopters and for visits to airbases. The maritime/naval domain is not covered. There is a recognised need to update and modernise the document further in the future to take account of the impact of emerging technologies on militaries in the OSCE region.[5]

Assessment

VD is about 'accidental' conflict prevention – it cannot prevent a determined state from invading. It has been weakened by a lack of implementation by Russia and Belarus.

- Annual Exchange of Military Information (AEMI)

A unique military transparency mechanism, in which most OSCE states continue to participate. Russia suspended its participation in the annual exchange of military data in 2022, a few weeks before it invaded Ukraine. 52 of the 57 participating states had shared their data on time in 2023; some submitted late while Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan do not usually share their information.

- Defence Planning

This provision adds an element of foresight to the AEMI by requiring states to submit updates on their defence planning, defence spending and military doctrine.

- Risk Reduction

These tools can support conflict prevention or crisis management but are unlikely to prevent intentional conflict when one or more parties are set on a violent path. Rather, they can help to provide off-ramps and de-escalation measures, which could either reduce the risks of unintended escalation or help to provide alternatives to confrontation.

- Mechanism for Consultation and Cooperation as regards unusual Military Activities

The mechanism has been invoked by participating States on many occasions to clarify the intentions of other States. Notable instances include the activation concerning security developments in former Yugoslavia, Georgia, and Ukraine. Ukraine invoked the mechanism in response to Russia's military activities in 2014, 2021, and 2022.

The Vienna Document (VD) is a unique instrument that provides for greater military transparency and communications

The invocation of the mechanism on other occasions allowed participating States to engage in a structured debate, leading to specific recommendations for de-escalation. Some preventive actions were also assessed as effective at the time. However, the case of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has illustrated the weakness of the process if a powerful state simply denies the situation.

States have the ability to call an ad hoc meeting of the PC and FSC for all participating states to discuss concerns. However, this is underutilised and there are questions about how much awareness there is of this part of the mechanism.[6]

- Co-operation as regards Hazardous Incidents of a Military Nature

This tool allows participating States to report and clarify hazardous military incidents to prevent misunderstandings and mitigate their impact on other states. If such an incident occurs on a participating State's territory, that State can request clarification, which must be provided without delay. These incidents can be discussed at the OSCE's Forum for Security Co-operation (FSC) and the Annual Implementation Assessment Meeting (AIAM).

The mechanism has not been invoked to date. However, it can be helpful to participating States in clarifying hazardous incidents during a conflict, e.g. Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), or if munitions unintentionally end up in another country. The tool could be employed in the event of incidents involving military applications of AI.

- Voluntary Hosting of Visits to Dispel Concerns about Military Activities

Participating States are encouraged to invite other participating States to conduct visits to areas within the host State's territory where a military activity in question is occurring. The host State and visiting States can share joint or individual feedback on the visit with other participating States.

This is an underutilised tool with great potential for transparency, provided there is the political will. An indication of the sensitivity and complexity of implementing these visits came in 2014, when Ukraine used this mechanism to invite monitors from several EU states to observe military activity on the ground, following the hostile takeovers by the separatist forces in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. The German-led team of 8 military visitors was taken hostage by the Russian-backed separatists, prompting OSCE mediation using quiet diplomacy and good offices. Subsequently, a multinational team of observers was sent in, including Russian nationals.

The ability to conduct evaluations and inspections is important. For example, in April 2021, both Sweden and Estonia raised concerns that Russia was not reducing its military presence near Voronezh despite earlier expectations. Both countries were able to send personnel to verify the situation but found no evidence of supply of logistics stores, equipment or vehicles.

Special decisions, such as those made by the Forum for Security Cooperation (FSC), can extend the scope of inspections, though such measures remain voluntary.

Some countries, such as Finland, have opted to publish their military data, a practice that other nations should consider adopting. This could be a straightforward way to ensure more transparency, providing the public with access to key information. While much of this data may be known through intelligence gathering, publishing it serves as a useful confirmation of existing knowledge.

Challenges also remain in the effective implementation of verification mechanisms. For example, countries like Belarus and Russia have often used their allocated visit quotas early in the cycle, leaving little room for additional inspections later in the year. This results in them inviting each other for visits, which limits the diversity of inspections.

Recommendations

To address these and other issues, there are ongoing discussions about reforming the mechanism, such as increasing the number of visits and expanding the pool of inspectors. Such measures could improve transparency and accountability in military activities, but progress has been slow.

In terms of adapting to take account of new technologies: Developing ways to monitor such capabilities is a critical future challenge for all governments and international organisations as norms are yet to be established. The OSCE could potentially be one of the fora where norms are developed, although the task will be a long and difficult one.

In general (not only in the OSCE), there appears to be more willingness among states to discuss AI in the military than to discuss offensive cyber or biological weapons. One possible opportunity comes from a UN process in 2025 to assess ways to establish international guardrails for AI in the military. The OSCE should contribute to this process, and in their contributions to the UN process, member states should consider how to incorporate a role for the OSCE. The OSCE staff may also be able to engage with the REAIM process. It is worth noting that Russia has opposed much of the current UN approach to AI in the military domain and has expressed complaints about "narrow and non-inclusive groups of states" putting forward principles, but it may be worth exploring whether the same objections would arise at the OSCE.

There are ongoing discussions about reforming the mechanism, such as increasing the number of visits and expanding the pool of inspectors.

Other Forum for Security Co-operation (FSC) Tools

Dayton Peace Agreement Article IV – sub-regional arms control

The OSCE has played a key role in supporting Article IV of Annex 1-B of the Dayton Peace Agreement, which focuses on sub-regional arms control to promote security and stability in the Western Balkans following the 1992 – 1995 Bosnian War.

Assessment

The OSCE provided support for the negotiation, implementation and monitoring of the negotiated arms control measures, which led to substantial reductions in heavy weaponry, including tanks, artillery and combat aircraft in the region. For example, it organised and facilitated inspections among signatory states (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia) to verify compliance with arms reduction commitments and trained local officials and military personnel in arms control implementation and compliance reporting and monitoring.

In December 2014, the signatory states assumed full responsibility for regional stability and arms control. Since then, the OSCE has shifted from a hands-on role to a more supportive capacity, providing assistance as needed, including facilitating the meetings of the signatory states.

The implementation of Article IV of the Dayton Peace Agreement continues well, with the limits on heavy weaponry consistently remaining below the threshold and participating States actively exchanging information. It is a good example of a successful implementation of a peace agreement on the regional level.

"Joint engagement, particularly in the post-conflict phase in the Western Balkans, was where OSCE co-operation with the UN became most intense. This was the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the OSCE became part of a co-ordinated international effort to implement the Dayton Peace Accords of 1995 and later inherited a significant number of activities, notably police support. This culminated in July 1999 with the OSCE Mission in Kosovo taking the lead role in matters relating to institution- and democracy-building, rule of law, and human rights as a distinct but integral component of the UNInterim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK)."

Lamberto Zannier, The OSCE and Chapter VIII of the United Nations Charter – Contributing to Global Peace and Security, 2015

OSCE Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) to Reduce the Risks of Conflict Stemming from the Use of ICTs
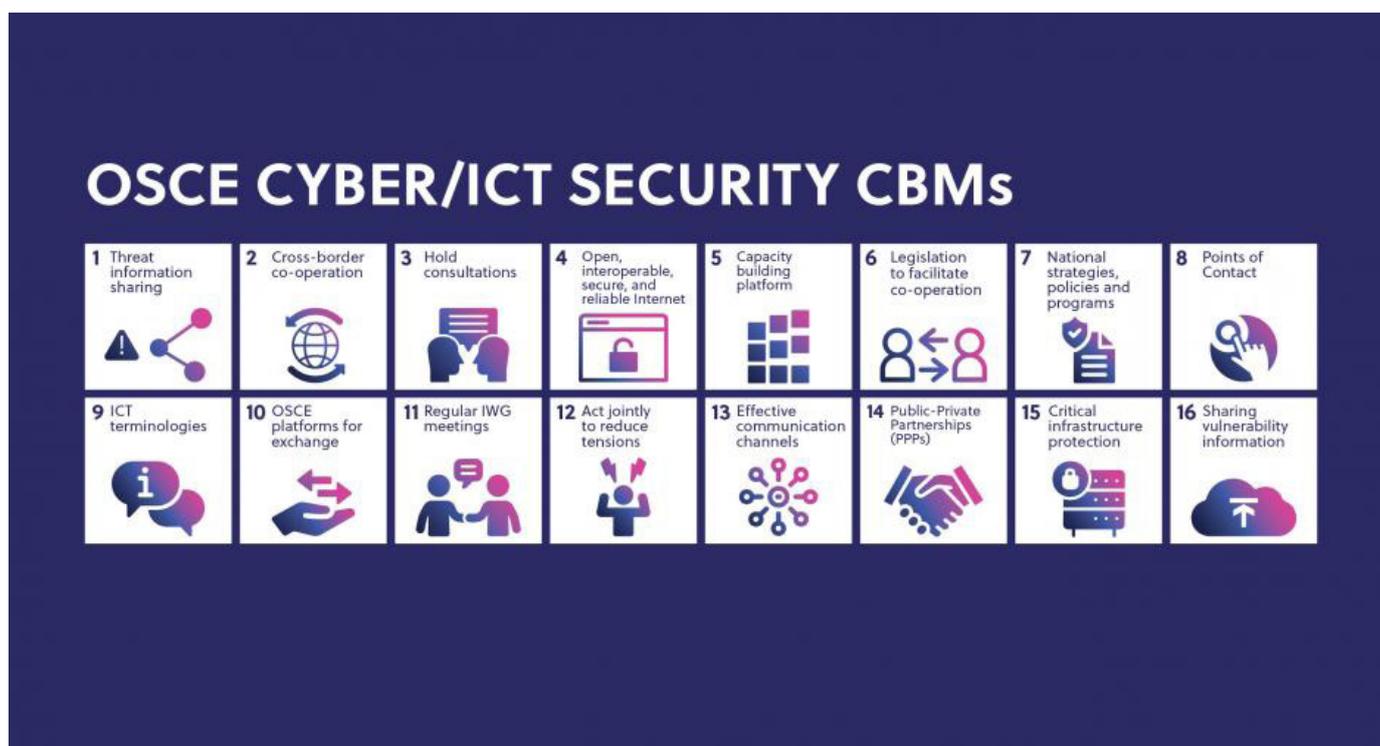
▪ **Figure 1. https:**//www.osce.org/files/imagecache/10_large_gallery/f/images/hires/a/c/530305.jpg?1667401364

The participating States adopted in 2013 a pioneering set of confidence-building measures (CBMs) to reduce the risks of conflict stemming from the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). It focuses on a number of transparency measures that enable voluntary exchanges of information and communication among states on several levels, from the practitioner to the policy-making level, and added five cooperation measures in 2016. It includes an Informal Working Group under the Security Committee [to double check:], which is one of very few such working groups in which Russia still participates, and which has continued to function even as numerous other working groups have struggled to operate.[7]

Assessment

The strength of the OSCE cyber CBMs lies in their ability to bring together experts, diplomats and policymakers, thereby creating a shared community. Meetings are well-attended, fostering dialogue and the exchange of best practices among diverse stakeholders. The OSCE has also developed and successfully completed an e-learning course on cyber diplomacy, to enhance the participating States' understanding and implementation of cyber CBMs. Furthermore, the report on cyber incident classification has provided valuable insights into emerging practices within the OSCE region and offered a foundation for developing consistent approaches to managing cybersecurity incidents.

The OSCE's work in cyber CBMs has gained global recognition, with the Organisation frequently invited to UN meetings and other international forums to share its experience and lessons learned. Looking ahead, the OSCE is well-positioned to continue advancing

Expert comment

"Cyber is related very clearly to the OSCE security dynamic area. It is an intergovernmental problem, and the OSCE can provide useful framework for de-escalation on this."

cyber diplomacy and expanding the reach of its instruments, thereby solidifying its role as a leader in promoting cyber stability and security.

However, the effectiveness of the OSCE cyber CBMs is increasingly questioned as the number and sophistication of cyber-attacks continue to rise. This also highlights the limitations of this tool, which is that these measures are not designed to directly address or reduce the volume of cyber-attacks, particularly those originating from non-state actors, criminal organisations or proxies. Sometimes participating States also fail to act on commitments or, worse, are suspected of engaging in or supporting malicious cyber activities.

Recommendations

The tool can be strengthened by introducing mechanisms to track and evaluate the implementation of CBMs, such as regular reporting, peer reviews or independent assessments. Efforts should also be made to address the growing influence of non-state actors in cyberspace, such as through public-private partnerships or encouraging regional cooperation to tackle cybercrime. Continuously updating the cyber CBM framework to reflect emerging threats, such as AI-enabled cyber-attacks, ransomware-as-a-service and supply chain vulnerabilities, would ensure that the measures remain relevant and responsive.

Document on Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBM) in the Naval Field in the Black Sea

The Document on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures (CSBM) in the Naval Field aims to enhance transparency and trust among participating States, Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine, through the exchange of information on naval forces (which are excluded from the Vienna Document), operations, and planned activities.

Assessment

Until Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea, the agreement functioned effectively. States held annual meetings to review its implementation, exchange updates and discuss areas of concern. Every five years, participating States conducted port visits, which provided opportunities for practical cooperation and confidence-building. At the same time, the scope of activities remained limited to modest measures such as exchanging naval documents and organising structured port visits. In addition, a variety of other OSCE member states have signed bilateral naval CSBM agreements, some of which use the OSCE as a meeting place for their annual exchanges of written information.

The OSCE Document on Small Arms and Light Weapons

The document outlines the norms, principles, and measures designed to comprehensively address the destabilising accumulation and uncontrolled proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW).

The OSCE's approach to SALW stands out as a comprehensive and regionally tailored effort within the broader international landscape of SALW control. While global frameworks like the United Nations Programme of Action (UN PoA) and the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) focus on setting universal standards, the OSCE offers a more focused, pragmatic and region-specific implementation mechanism.

The OSCE supplements normative frameworks with technical assistance and capacity-building programmes, which often lack sufficient emphasis in broader global agreements. Its Best Practice Guides and other handbooks are a recognised toolset for practical implementation and are shared globally as models.

The OSCE's focus is on a post-conflict environment, where it actively supports the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of combatants and the safe disposal of weapons in post-conflict regions. For example, in the Western Balkans and South Caucasus, the OSCE supports DDR programmes and surplus stockpile destruction.

The OSCE also has rigorous transparency measures, such as mandatory annual information exchanges on SALW transfers and stockpile management, whereas global frameworks like the UN PoA rely on voluntary reporting, which can lead to inconsistent participation.

Recommendations

Last but not least, the OSCE's SALW framework is flexible, allowing it to address emerging challenges such as technological developments in weaponry or the diversion of SALW to non-state actors. For instance, it can encourage participating States to adopt new technologies for marking and tracing weapons or to monitor emerging threats like the use of drones in armed conflicts. It is also well-placed to support stockpile security projects to prevent theft or misuse and facilitate collaboration between States to disrupt illicit arms trafficking networks.

OSCE Document on Stockpiles of Conventional Ammunition

The OSCE Document on Stockpiles of Conventional Ammunition (SCA) is a key framework addressing the challenges posed by surplus, poorly managed or inadequately secured stockpiles of conventional ammunition. These stockpiles represent a serious threat to security, public safety and environmental health, especially in post-conflict regions or areas with limited resources.

Assessment

The OSCE helps the participating States to put the SCA principles into practice through a number of ways. For example, it sends teams of experts to assess stockpiles on the ground. These teams look at the condition of the ammunition, identify any potential risks and offer recommendations on how to address them.

The OSCE's SALW framework is flexible, allowing it to address emerging challenges

Another important part of the OSCE's work involves building the capacity of participating States. This includes organising training sessions and technical workshops aimed at improving how stockpiles are managed. For example, the OSCE might train personnel on safe storage practices or on how to handle unstable ammunition.

When it comes to dealing with surplus ammunition, the OSCE provides support for safe destruction projects. This could involve dismantling old artillery shells, rockets, or other explosives that are no longer needed. The OSCE also helps countries improve the physical security of their storage facilities.

The OSCE has implemented numerous projects under the SCA framework. Examples include the safe destruction of rocket fuel and artillery shells in Belarus, Kazakhstan and other participating States; securing ammunition depots in conflict-prone regions, such as the Western Balkans; and training national personnel in stockpile management in Central Asia.

Recommendations

To adapt to technological advancements, digital tools could be integrated into stockpile management to enhance tracking and transparency, especially as concerns 3D-printed ammunition or advanced explosives. The OSCE can also offer additional training to participating States to enhance their capacity, for example, in handling advanced explosives or responding to new technologies.

Similarly, the current framework could benefit from stronger guidance on environmentally friendly destruction methods, such as the use of green technologies, while also encouraging environmental assessments of stockpile sites and integrating cleanup efforts into the framework.

In active conflict or post-conflict zones, where the risk of diversion is highest, the OSCE can develop specific guidelines for securing and managing ammunition as well as create rapid-response teams.

Implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1540

UN Security Council Resolution 1540 (2004) is a pivotal international measure aimed at preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs)—including nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons—to non-state actors such as terrorist organisations. Adopted unanimously under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the resolution places binding obligations on all UN member states to establish and enforce domestic measures that prevent the development, acquisition, or transfer of WMDs and their delivery systems by non-state actors.

Assessment

The OSCE is one of three main international organisations involved in implementing 1540 in its region, along with the EU and UN, and in cooperation with the OPCW and Biological Weapons Implementation Support Unit. Further assessment would be needed to attribute the specific impact that each implementing organisation has, but the overall implementation of this resolution is highly effective, especially because it enjoys strong political consensus among states.

The OSCE is one of three main international organisations involved in implementing 1540 in its region

The resolution has been instrumental in encouraging countries to enhance their legal and regulatory systems, improving global norms against WMD proliferation, and fostering cooperation among nations. Many states have introduced laws criminalising unauthorised activities related to WMDs, alongside stringent export controls to monitor and regulate the transfer of dual-use goods and technologies. These measures have closed critical loopholes and improved oversight, ensuring that sensitive materials, technologies, and expertise are less accessible to non-state actors.

The resolution has also reinforced international norms against WMD proliferation, complementing existing treaties such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), and the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). Unlike these treaties, which primarily address state actors, UNSCR 1540 focuses on non-state actors, making WMD non-proliferation a universal legal obligation. This unique approach has elevated the issue to a global priority, ensuring that even countries not party to the major treaties adopt preventive measures, thus filling a critical gap in the international non-proliferation framework.

Through the establishment of the 1540 Committee, the resolution has facilitated extensive international cooperation and capacity-building. States have collaborated on sharing expertise, resources, and best practices to improve implementation efforts. The committee has been instrumental in connecting states in need of technical or financial assistance with donors. This has resulted in successful regional initiatives, such as workshops and training programmes that have strengthened border security, improved export controls, and enhanced the capacity of law enforcement agencies to detect and interdict illicit trafficking of WMD-related materials. Enhanced vigilance, improved border monitoring, and better safeguarding of sensitive materials have all reduced opportunities for terrorists to acquire WMD-related resources.

Another notable achievement of the resolution is its ability to raise global awareness and mobilise resources to address proliferation risks. By keeping the issue at the forefront of the international security agenda, UNSCR 1540 has inspired governments, industries, and civil society to take proactive measures. This includes engaging the private sector, particularly companies involved in the production or transport of dual-use goods, to adopt stronger compliance measures and reduce vulnerabilities in the supply chain.

Specific successes include the development of national action plans by many states, outlining concrete steps to strengthen their non-proliferation regimes. Targeted capacity-building programmes have significantly improved the ability of states to monitor and control sensitive materials, and the OSCE has helped to facilitate this in Central Asia. Collaboration with specialised organisations like the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) has further enhanced implementation by leveraging their technical expertise and resources.

Despite its successes, UNSCR 1540 faces significant challenges. Many states, particularly in developing regions, lack the financial, technical, and human resources to fully implement its requirements, leaving gaps in export controls,

border security, and regulatory frameworks. Additionally, the resolution relies on voluntary compliance, with no enforcement mechanisms to address non-implementation. Another issue is insufficient reporting; some member states have failed to submit comprehensive or updated reports to the 1540 Committee, making it difficult to assess global progress. Furthermore, the evolving nature of threats—such as advancements in synthetic biology, 3D printing, and digital proliferation of sensitive information—poses new challenges that UNSCR 1540 must address.

Geopolitical dynamics also pose a significant challenge to the resolution's effectiveness. Political tensions and rivalries among major powers have, at times, impeded international cooperation and undermined the spirit of collective action required to address WMD proliferation. For example, strained relations between the United States, Russia, and China have made it difficult to achieve consensus on strengthening the resolution or addressing specific cases of non-compliance. This lack of unity weakens the resolution's implementation and its ability to respond to emerging threats.

Recommendations

To enhance its impact, greater international support for capacity-building is essential, particularly for states struggling with implementation. This could include technical assistance, financial aid, and training to develop the necessary legal and regulatory frameworks. Strengthening the 1540 Committee's monitoring mechanisms and encouraging more comprehensive reporting would improve global oversight and compliance. The resolution must also adapt to address emerging threats by expanding its scope and integrating strategies to counter modern proliferation risks. Finally, increased collaboration between states, regional organisations, and international institutions is vital to achieving the resolution's goals.

Implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security in the OSCE region

Despite women playing an important role in emergency response efforts, post-conflict recovery, and democratic progress, they remain largely absent from formal negotiating and decision-making platforms related to de-escalation, conflict mitigation and relief and recovery processes. This exclusion limits the effectiveness and sustainability of peace-building and recovery efforts.

Assessment

The OSCE recognises that ensuring women's active participation and addressing the specific impacts of conflict on women is essential for achieving long-term stability and growth. The Organisation's commitment to integrating gender perspectives into its operations, as detailed in the 2004 Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality, highlights a strategic effort to ensure that women's voices are considered in negotiations and decision-making processes. In 2005, the OSCE adopted Ljubljana Ministerial Decision No. 14 on women in conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation.

The OSCE recognises that ensuring women's active participation and addressing the specific impacts of conflict on women is essential for achieving long-term stability and growth.

The FSC is an increasingly rare pol-mil channel with Russia

The OSCE also supports the implementation of UNSCR 1325 in the OSCE region by encouraging information-sharing and peer support among participating states, providing its own programming and capacity-building, such as training for security services on WPS.

The OSCE asks all participating States to submit National Action Plans to advance women, peace and security. According to a 2020 study, the number who did so rose from 27 to 36 between 2015 and 2020. However, the same study notes that WPS continued to be underfunded and that 86% of those national action plans included little or no information on how they would be financed.

Assessing the effectiveness of these initiatives, however, can be complex due to the varied political, social, and cultural landscapes in which the OSCE operates. Progress has been achieved in the integration of gender issues across the organisation's structures and operational activities. For example, the OSCE has made strides towards gender parity among staff and supported projects aimed at amplifying women's voices.

The latter, for instance, includes targeted support to women's civil society groups, as observed in the Women's International Networking (WIN) programme's activities in Ukraine, which aims to enhance women's participation in public life. WPS has also been a key element of the OSCE's work on preventing violent extremism.

There are other effective programmes of capacity-building and network-building for women peacemakers in the OSCE region. For example, the OSCE has established a Networking Platform for Women Leaders, including Peacebuilders and Mediators, which connects women mediators and peacebuilders active in the OSCE region and aims to strengthen their ability to meaningfully engage in and influence peace processes at all levels

Despite these efforts, there are persistent challenges, particularly in ensuring the consistent application of gender policies across all participating States. Additionally, as in other international organisations, the adoption of language and resolution on women, peace and security has not immediately translated into universal buy-in or the acceptance that this is a meaningful priority rather than a box-ticking exercise. A 'gender backlash' in parts of the OSCE region has also led issues of gender to become more politicised.

Forum for Security Co-operation (FSC)

The Forum for Security Co-operation (FSC), established to address arms control, conflict prevention, and confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs), remains an essential platform for dialogue among participating states. It is an increasingly rare pol-mil channel with Russia – and one which Russia uses for deterrence and risk-reduction messaging with NATO.

Assessment

However, it faces significant challenges, particularly in the current geopolitical climate. Russia's attempts to veto agendas and undermine consensus-based decision-making have increasingly paralysed the FSC, limiting its ability to respond effectively to security crises. This has been compounded by broader divisions

between participating States, a lack of enforcement mechanisms, and a disconnect between FSC discussions and actionable outcomes.

The FSC's relevance has further diminished due to the erosion of key arms control agreements, such as the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) and the challenges in modernising the Vienna Document. Its traditional focus on conventional military frameworks has not kept pace with emerging threats such as hybrid warfare, cybersecurity, and advanced military technologies, leaving a gap in its ability to address contemporary security challenges. Moreover, the FSC often struggles to translate its discussions into tangible, implementable measures, and its lack of enforcement mechanisms means that states can disregard commitments without significant consequences. This procedural inertia, combined with an insufficient focus on non-military aspects of security, limits the forum's effectiveness in addressing the complex and multi-faceted nature of modern crises.

Recommendations

To overcome these challenges, the FSC must adopt procedural and substantive reforms. For example, the FSC should broaden its agenda to incorporate emerging threats, such as disinformation campaigns and other hybrid threats, and create specialised working groups to develop specific CSBMs for these areas. In parallel, the FSC could establish a rapid response mechanism to address immediate security crises and introduce protocols for de-escalation in localised conflicts. Strengthening coordination with other OSCE structures, such as the Permanent Council and field missions, would ensure a more integrated approach to addressing security challenges.

Balancing the need for reform with its core function as a platform for dialogue among "non-likeminded" participating States is both challenging and essential. To maintain this balance, reforms should be carefully calibrated to avoid alienating any states or undermining the OSCE's principle of consensus-based decision-making, which is a cornerstone of its legitimacy.

To address this, procedural reforms could focus on enhancing functionality without compromising inclusivity. For example, introducing a 'consensus-minus-one rule' for specific procedural or thematic decisions—such as the adoption of discussion agendas or side event proposals—would prevent obstruction without excluding dissenting states entirely. This rule would need to be tightly defined to avoid overreach and ensure that it applies only to decisions that do not undermine the fundamental principles of consensus.

Additionally, the rotating chair function can be leveraged to maintain the balance between inclusivity and progress. Chairs can use their mandate to design agendas that address broad, less contentious issues while fostering dialogue on divisive topics through informal channels such as side events or parallel consultations. By framing discussions around shared interests—such as counterterrorism, disaster response, or climate-related security risks—the chair can create opportunities for constructive engagement without forcing confrontational debates.

Balancing the need for reform with its core function as a platform for dialogue among "non-likeminded" participating States is both challenging and essential.

The FSC should foster a culture of inclusivity by amplifying the voices of smaller or neutral states, which often bridge divides between more polarised blocs.

Another avenue is strengthening the FSC's role as a knowledge-sharing hub, which benefits all participating States, regardless of political alignment. By emphasising technical discussions, such as updates to the Vienna Document or confidence-building measures for new security threats, the FSC can shift focus away from political deadlocks and toward shared practical goals. For instance, discussions on cybersecurity or private military companies could be framed as cooperative efforts to improve transparency and mutual security.

Lastly, the FSC should foster a culture of inclusivity by amplifying the voices of smaller or neutral states, which often bridge divides between more polarised blocs. These states can play a mediating role, proposing constructive compromises and promoting trust-building initiatives. The FSC could also engage external experts and civil society actors through informal mechanisms, enriching discussions with diverse perspectives while ensuring that formal decision-making remains the purview of participating States.

Structured Dialogue

The OSCE Structured Dialogue is an informal, state-led process established in 2016 to address current and emerging security challenges in the OSCE region. Its primary aim is to rebuild trust among participating States, address shared security concerns, and explore opportunities for future cooperation in the political-military dimension of security. While it remains an important forum for dialogue, its progress is hindered by a range of challenges, including the lack of political will and of binding outcomes.

Assessment

One of the key achievements of the Structured Dialogue is that it has provided a vital platform for engagement amid rising tensions in the region. In an increasingly polarised geopolitical environment, marked by mistrust between NATO-aligned states and Russia, the Dialogue has created space for discussions about military risks, threat perceptions, and arms control. These discussions have played an important role in fostering communication and reducing the risk of misunderstandings and unintended escalation, particularly in sensitive regions like Eastern Europe and the Black Sea. The Dialogue has also contributed to greater transparency in military activities, such as large-scale exercises and troop movements, and has reaffirmed the importance of OSCE principles, including sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the indivisibility of security.

Another notable achievement of the Structured Dialogue is its effort to broaden its scope to include emerging security challenges. While the process is primarily focused on political-military issues, it has increasingly addressed topics such as hybrid warfare, cybersecurity, and the implications of new technologies. This adaptation reflects a recognition of the evolving nature of security threats and the need for the OSCE to remain relevant in addressing them.

However, despite these successes, the Structured Dialogue faces significant limitations. Chief among these is the geopolitical divide between participating States, particularly between Russia and Western nations. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has

deepened these divisions, making meaningful progress difficult. Tensions have also led to a lack of consensus on priorities, with different states focusing on divergent issues, further diluting the effectiveness of the Dialogue.

Another challenge is the informal and non-binding nature of the Structured Dialogue, which restricts its ability to deliver enforceable agreements. While it fosters valuable dialogue and mutual understanding, it has struggled to produce tangible outcomes or policy changes that address security risks. Many of its recommendations remain rhetorical rather than actionable, reflecting a broader issue within the OSCE of over-reliance on voluntary cooperation and political goodwill.

The Structured Dialogue's effectiveness is also undermined by its limited engagement with broader dimensions of security. While it has begun addressing non-traditional threats like cybersecurity, it has yet to fully integrate other interconnected issues, such as economic instability, environmental degradation, and the impact of climate change on security. These broader challenges, which are increasingly critical to global stability, remain underrepresented in the Dialogue's discussions.

Furthermore, the Structured Dialogue has demonstrated limited impact in responding to ongoing crises. Its recommendations often lack the urgency required. This reflects a broader issue of insufficient political will among participating States to implement confidence- and security-building measures. The lack of follow-through on the Dialogue's initiatives also highlights the OSCE's broader resource constraints, which limit its capacity to support substantive action.

Despite these challenges, the Structured Dialogue remains relevant as one of the few forums where states with opposing views can engage in open discussions about security. Its informal nature allows for candid exchanges that might not be possible in more formalised settings, and its efforts to promote transparency and confidence-building have contributed to regional stability. However, the Dialogue's full potential remains unrealised due to the entrenched mistrust among participating States and the absence of enforceable commitments.

Recommendations

Some ideas to enhance the tool's effectiveness could include:

• Track II diplomacy

Informal Track II discussions involving academics, civil society experts, and former policymakers could provide a less politically charged environment to foster creative problem-solving that can later be fed into the formal Structured Dialogue. This would also help to tap into expertise outside of government, particularly on emerging threats, like cyber threats and hybrid warfare. Incorporating younger voices, such as youth representatives or observers from participating States might create the atmosphere more conducive to dialogue and understanding.

Despite these challenges, the Structured Dialogue remains relevant as one of the few forums where states with opposing views can engage in open discussions about security.

- Regional sub-dialogues

Smaller, region-specific discussions within the broader Structured Dialogue framework could allow participating States with shared challenges—such as those in the South Caucasus or the Western Balkans—to focus on localised solutions.

- Middle powers and non-aligned states

Empowering middle powers (e.g. Turkey) and non-aligned states (e.g. Central Asian countries) within the OSCE to act as bridges between opposing blocs.

Annual Security Review Conference (ASRC)

The OSCE Annual Security Review Conference (ASRC) serves as a vital platform for dialogue among participating States, focusing on regional and international security challenges. It plays a key role in reviewing existing efforts and fostering cooperation within the OSCE's political-military dimension of security. Over the years, the ASRC has achieved notable successes, although its potential is often constrained by various challenges.

Assessment

One of the ASRC's significant accomplishments has been its contribution to confidence- and security-building measures. Through frameworks such as the Vienna Document, it has promoted transparency in military activities, helping to build trust and reduce the risk of unintended military escalations. The conference has also been instrumental in advancing counterterrorism measures by encouraging improved intelligence sharing and the adoption of best practices to prevent violent extremism. Its focus on border security has catalysed regional agreements, particularly in Central Asia, improving collaboration in tackling trafficking, organised crime, and smuggling.

Additionally, the ASRC has provided a platform for developing cybersecurity confidence-building measures, which have sought to reduce misunderstandings and foster communication between states in the event of cyber incidents. Furthermore, the conference has occasionally facilitated dialogue on conflict prevention and management, offering opportunities for participating States to address grievances and explore potential solutions to disputes, such as those in Ukraine, Moldova, and the South Caucasus.

However, despite these successes, the ASRC faces significant shortcomings. Geopolitical divisions frequently overshadow its proceedings. Disagreements on critical issues, such as the conflicts in Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh, often result in stalemates. This reflects the broader challenge with the OSCE's consensus-based decision-making in times of division.

Another major limitation of the ASRC is the gap between its declarations and their implementation. While the conference often produces ambitious recommendations, the lack of enforcement mechanisms within the OSCE means that their realisation depends entirely on the political will of participating states, which varies significantly. Critics have also argued that the ASRC places excessive emphasis on dialogue, often prioritising discussions

over tangible actions. This has led to concerns that many of the conference's outcomes remain rhetorical rather than actionable.

Resource constraints further undermine the ASRC's effectiveness. Operating on a modest budget, the OSCE struggles to provide the financial and logistical support necessary to follow through on its initiatives, such as capacity-building in cybersecurity and counterterrorism. This limitation is compounded by the underrepresentation of non-military dimensions of security at the conference. Emerging threats like climate change and its impact on security receive less attention compared to traditional military concerns.

The ASRC has also demonstrated limitations in responding to ongoing crises. Its recommendations often lack the urgency required to address pressing situations, such as the war in Ukraine or the political crisis in Belarus. Furthermore, the conference has been criticised for not fully adapting to the rapidly evolving nature of security threats, such as hybrid warfare, artificial intelligence, and the growing role of private actors in conflicts.

Recommendations

In a polarised geopolitical environment, the ASRC must evolve to remain a relevant and effective platform. By focusing on shared challenges, fostering informal dialogue and emphasising transparency and incremental progress, the Conference might be able to help build bridges and re-create space for cooperation over time.

Experts emphasised the importance of active engagement by senior decision-makers and adaptability in discussions. For example, ensuring high-level participation of ministers and senior diplomats to signal the importance of the Conference or proactive engagement by the OSCE leadership with participating States to secure political buy-in before the Conference. Likewise, other measures to consider might be combining formal plenary sessions with smaller, focused workshops or allowing for more iterative discussions, where topics can be revisited across multiple sessions to build consensus.

Annual Implementation Assessment Meeting (AIAM)

The AIAM focuses on evaluating the implementation of existing arms control agreements and confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs), as outlined in documents such as the Vienna Document 2011. It has been an important forum for discussing and agreeing on how to update and adapt many of the OSCE's conflict-cycle tools.

The Meeting was not held in 2022-2024.

Security Committee

The OSCE Security Committee focuses on transnational threats and security challenges in the OSCE region. It addresses issues that go beyond individual state borders, contributing to the organisation's comprehensive approach to security. The Security Committee plays a critical role in developing policies and recommendations that are then presented to the OSCE Permanent

In a polarised geopolitical environment, the ASRC must evolve to remain a relevant and effective platform.

In combating human trafficking, the Committee has played a pivotal role

Council and other decision-making bodies. It also supports the implementation of OSCE commitments and initiatives in the field of security.

Assessment

The Security Committee has made significant contributions to the OSCE's broader security objectives through various initiatives and programmes. In the area of cybersecurity, the Committee has introduced non-binding confidence-building measures aimed at promoting transparency and fostering communication between states to address cyber incidents effectively and reduce associated risks.

In combating human trafficking, the Committee has played a pivotal role by supporting participating States in developing and implementing national action plans that align with OSCE commitments. This effort seeks to disrupt trafficking networks and improve victim identification and support mechanisms.

Cross-border cooperation has also been a focus of the Committee's work, with an emphasis on strengthening regional agreements to enhance border security. This has been particularly effective in areas where organised crime and smuggling are prevalent, creating frameworks that improve collaboration among states.

Additionally, the Security Committee has advanced capacity-building programmes designed to equip participating States with the tools and knowledge to combat terrorism, manage borders effectively, and address cyber threats. These programmes have included training and technical assistance, enabling states to better respond to complex and evolving security challenges. Through these efforts, the Committee has demonstrated its value in addressing transnational threats and fostering collaboration across the OSCE region.

The OSCE Security Committee, while instrumental in addressing transnational security challenges, faces several limitations that hinder its effectiveness. In common with most OSCE tools, these include reliance on consensus-based decision-making, which is often stymied at times of geopolitical division, and inability to enforce its recommendations; yet this is part of the nature of the OSCE.

Resource constraints also pose a serious limitation. Operating on a relatively modest budget, the OSCE struggles to support the Security Committee's initiatives comprehensively, and reliance on voluntary contributions often leads to uneven funding for key programs.

Recommendations

Despite these challenges, the OSCE Security Committee will continue to serve as an important platform for fostering dialogue and cooperation on non-military security threats. Its traditional focus on established issues should be complemented by more dialogue on emerging challenges, such as the misuse of artificial intelligence, hybrid threats, or the implications of climate change on security.

OSCE Mandated Mechanisms

Peaceful settlement of disputes based on conciliation and/or arbitration (Convention on Conciliation and Arbitration, Valletta Mechanism)

The commitment to the peaceful settlement of disputes is firmly established in different OSCE documents, including the Helsinki Final Act, the 1989 Concluding Document of the Vienna Follow-up Meeting, the 1990 Charter of Paris for a New Europe and the 1992 Helsinki Document.

Assessment

The "Valletta Mechanism" was the first adopted formal comprehensive procedure for the peaceful dispute settlement focusing on conciliation and arbitration, but one that has never been invoked, which some interviewees suggested might be due to a lack of awareness.

In 1992, participating States further adopted several key instruments, including the "Provisions for a CSCE Conciliation Commission", "Provisions for Directed Conciliation" and the "Convention on Conciliation and Arbitration within the CSCE", which led to the creation of the Court of Conciliation and Arbitration. Despite these efforts, none of these mechanisms or procedures have been activated to date.

One primary reason is that participating States may prefer direct political negotiations and informal diplomatic channels rather than engaging in formal legal procedures. Concerns about sovereignty also discourage States from engaging in procedures leading to binding external decisions. Limited awareness of or confidence in these tools further reduces their appeal, and the complex political dynamics within the OSCE region, particularly in disputes involving major powers or sensitive issues, make their activation highly challenging. Despite this, these mechanisms remain available for future use.

Mechanism for Consultation and Co-operation with Regard to Emergency Situations ("Berlin Mechanism")

A consultation and cooperation procedure concerning emergency situations which may arise from a violation of one of the Principles of the Helsinki Final Act or as a result of major disruptions endangering peace, security or stability.

Activation of the "Berlin Mechanism" has occurred on several occasions, primarily within the context of the Yugoslav wars. However, following the December 1994 Budapest Decisions, which provide that the Permanent Council may be convened in an emergency situation, it is, in practice, the Permanent Council that manages emergency situations without having formally to set in motion the Berlin mechanism.

Vienna and Moscow Mechanisms

Both the Vienna and Moscow Mechanisms provide a dialogue platform and a process for addressing concerns relating to the implementation of the OSCE Human Dimension commitments. The Vienna Mechanism (VM) allows one or more participating States

Moscow Mechanism expert missions have proven effective in identifying patterns of behaviour requiring urgent international attention.

to request information about the fulfilment of Human Dimension commitments in another OSCE state. In addition, the Moscow Mechanism (MM) has introduced expert missions and rapporteurs and a shorter timeframe for response.

There have been over 100 invocations of the VM and over a dozen activations of the MM to date. Both mechanisms have proved an important tool to prevent indifference and to expose or clarify allegations of serious human rights and humanitarian law violations. For example, the OSCE report on human rights violations in Belarus following the 2020 presidential election and that on violations committed in 2022 in Ukraine, both completed as part the Moscow Mechanism assessments, were the first international expert reports on the purported violations.

Following the recommendations in the Belarus 2020 report, the International Accountability Platform for Belarus was set up. It is regarded by Belarusian civil society and the international community as a vital instrument for collecting further evidence and supporting justice efforts in a comprehensive way, for example, through universal jurisdiction.

Moscow Mechanism expert missions have proven effective in identifying patterns of behaviour requiring urgent international attention. The MM flexibility and rapid response have enabled the timely documentation of developments, providing critical information to guide further actions by other OSCE institutions and international organisations. At the same time, the conclusions of rapporteurs and expert missions are non-binding and largely ignored by their recipients.

Recommendations

Some recommended measures to improve this tool are enhancing its visibility and recognition by international human rights structures, extending reporting deadlines in more complex cases to allow for more comprehensive findings, and beefing up the ODIHR's role to provide for more coordination and follow-up action. The invocation of the mechanism could also be more frequently considered at the early warning stage of the conflict cycle to prevent violations of international law.[8]

OSCE Early Warning

Secretary General

The OSCE Secretary General (SG) plays an important administrative role, ensuring the effective functioning of the Organisation's structures, providing leadership, and coordinating activities to support the Chairperson-in-Office (CiO) in advancing the OSCE's mandate. Over the years, the SG has demonstrated the ability to navigate geopolitical challenges, implement decisions, and enhance the organisation's operational capacity. However, in the current climate of increasing geopolitical polarisation, the role faces new challenges that demand strategic adaptation and reform to maintain its effectiveness.

The SG has been instrumental in managing the OSCE's operational responses to crises, such as the deployment of the Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine in 2014. This mission, one of the OSCE's largest field operations, has provided neutral and critical reporting on the ground, playing a vital role in confidence-building during heightened tensions. Additionally, the SG has led efforts to modernise the OSCE's structures, streamlining administrative processes, enhancing financial accountability, and ensuring better allocation of limited resources to field operations and special missions. These reforms have improved the organisation's operational efficiency and responsiveness.

Another key area of success has been the SG's ability to foster dialogue and promote cooperation during critical geopolitical challenges. For instance, during the conflicts in the Balkans in the 1990s, the SG supported the implementation of the Dayton Accords, ensuring OSCE-led arms control and military stabilisation measures were effectively operationalised. This effort helped build trust among parties in a deeply divided region. Similarly, the SG played an important role in addressing tensions in Central Asia, particularly during the crisis in Kyrgyzstan in 2010. By coordinating OSCE resources and facilitating dialogue between the government and opposition groups, the SG contributed to de-escalation and stabilisation efforts during a volatile period.

Additionally, the SG has led efforts to address transnational security threats, including efforts to combat the illicit flow of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in the Caucasus and the Western Balkans. By facilitating workshops, providing technical assistance, and promoting best practices among participating States, the SG has strengthened regional cooperation to curb the proliferation of weapons that fuel instability. The SG's leadership has also extended to economic and environmental dimensions of security, such as initiatives to mitigate water resource disputes in Central Asia. These efforts, which integrated technical expertise with diplomatic dialogue, highlighted the OSCE's capacity to address non-military drivers of conflict under the SG's guidance.

However, the SG's role is increasingly constrained by geopolitical polarisation, particularly between Russia and Western countries. These divisions erode trust among member states, undermine consensus-based decision-making, and limit the SG's ability to mediate effectively. The lack of enforcement authority further weakens the SG's position, as the role relies heavily on the political will of participating States to implement OSCE decisions. This dependency is particularly problematic when rivalries overshadow collective action, leaving the SG with limited tools to bridge divides.

The SG role faces new challenges that demand strategic adaptation and reform

Recommendations

To address these challenges, the SG's mandate should be strengthened to allow for more proactive conflict prevention and crisis mediation. This could include granting the SG greater authority to engage directly with conflicting parties and propose initiatives independent of the Chairmanship. For instance, the SG could lead special envoys or mediation teams in long-standing conflicts, such as those in Ukraine or the South Caucasus, ensuring continuity across changing Chairmanships.

Additionally, the OSCE's reliance on consensus-based decision-making often leads to paralysis in times of disagreement. Introducing more flexible mechanisms, such as sub-regional agreements or coalitions of willing states, could enable the OSCE to advance specific initiatives without requiring unanimous approval.

The SG could also strengthen partnerships with other international organisations, such as the United Nations, European Union, and NATO, to amplify the OSCE's role in addressing complex security challenges. Enhanced coordination would allow the OSCE to leverage shared resources and expertise, particularly in areas like crisis response and monitoring missions. Moreover, the SG should prioritise adapting the OSCE to address evolving threats, including cybersecurity, hybrid warfare, and climate-related risks. Developing new confidence-building measures or early-warning systems for these challenges would ensure the organisation remains relevant and effective.

Fostering trust and inclusivity among participating States is another critical priority. The SG could convene informal discussions or "track-two" dialogues to reduce tensions and explore solutions outside formal negotiations. Additionally, increased public outreach and advocacy would bolster the OSCE's credibility and visibility, ensuring that its achievements and initiatives receive recognition and support.

Expert comment

"One of the things that were functioning well until late 90s was the consultations among participating states. Delegates would stay up until midnight discussing the terms of eg a protection mandate. It was a very intensive process of discussions on current issues that could be put on the table by the SG as a result of the missions. Now the report goes to the chairman and they consult different actors separately behind closed doors - they consult separately with the Americans, the Russians and the EU - but it kills the dialogue within the organisation which is then mediated by the chairmanship and which the SG may not even be aware of. Transparent and inclusive dialogue should return."

Chairperson in Office (CiO)

The OSCE Chairperson-in-Office (CiO) plays a central role in providing political leadership, setting the organisation's priorities, and advancing its agenda during the one-year Chairmanship term. The CiO's responsibilities include overseeing OSCE activities, facilitating dialogue among participating States, and responding to emerging crises. Historically, the CiO has been instrumental in steering the OSCE through periods of geopolitical tension, fostering cooperation, and addressing critical security challenges. However, the current climate of geopolitical polarisation presents significant obstacles to the CiO's ability to function effectively, necessitating reforms to enhance its impact and adaptability.

One notable success of the CiO has been its role in promoting dialogue and mediation during periods of heightened tensions. For instance, during the 1999 Kosovo crisis, Norway, as the CiO, played an important role in facilitating the OSCE's engagement in conflict prevention and post-conflict rehabilitation. The CiO supported the deployment of the Kosovo Verification Mission (KVM), which monitored compliance with ceasefire agreements and contributed to the de-escalation of violence in the region. Although the mission was ultimately withdrawn due to the escalation of hostilities, it demonstrated the OSCE's ability to act as a neutral party in a volatile situation.

Similarly, during the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, Finland, as the CiO, acted swiftly to mediate between the parties involved. The Chairmanship worked closely with other OSCE bodies to facilitate negotiations and support a framework for conflict resolution. Finland's efforts also ensured that the OSCE Mission to Georgia continued to play a vital role in monitoring developments on the ground and providing impartial assessments to the international community.

Another example is the 2001 crisis in Macedonia, where Romania, as the CiO, provided strong leadership in addressing the conflict between the government and ethnic Albanian groups. The CiO facilitated the OSCE's involvement in supporting the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which laid the groundwork for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. This included deploying the OSCE Spillover Monitor Mission to Skopje, which helped build confidence among the parties and supported the demilitarisation process.

In addition to these high-profile crises, the CiO has been instrumental in advancing smaller-scale but equally critical initiatives. For example, during the 2003 Dutch Chairmanship, the CiO prioritised addressing the frozen conflict in Transnistria, Moldova. While the conflict remains unresolved, the Dutch CiO succeeded in revitalising the negotiation process and strengthening the OSCE's presence in the region through confidence-building measures and dialogue facilitation.

These examples highlight the CiO's capacity to respond to diverse security challenges, from large-scale conflicts to protracted disputes. The CiO's leadership in these cases underscores its ability to mobilise OSCE resources, engage with conflicting parties, and act as a neutral platform for dialogue, even in highly polarised environments.

One notable success of the CiO has been its role in promoting dialogue and mediation during periods of heightened tensions.

The CiO has also been effective in advancing the OSCE's comprehensive security agenda. Chairmanships have prioritised transnational issues such as counterterrorism, human trafficking, and cyber threats, reflecting the OSCE's multidimensional approach to security. For instance, during its Chairmanship in 2021, Sweden emphasised human rights and gender equality, promoting initiatives to address violence against women and integrate a gender perspective into conflict prevention efforts. These priorities showcased the CiO's ability to highlight specific issues and drive targeted actions across the OSCE region.

Despite these successes, the CiO faces significant challenges in the current era of geopolitical polarisation. The consensus-based decision-making structure of the OSCE often paralyses action when states with competing interests fail to agree on critical issues. This has been evident in conflicts such as the war in Ukraine or the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, where entrenched divisions between Russia and Western states have limited the OSCE's ability to mediate effectively. The CiO's capacity to act is further constrained by its one-year term, which limits the time available to implement long-term strategies or build continuity in addressing protracted conflicts.

Recommendations

To enhance the CiO's effectiveness, structural and procedural reforms are necessary. One way to address the limitations of a one-year Chairmanship is to strengthen the role of the OSCE Troika, which comprises the current, preceding, and succeeding Chairs. By fostering greater collaboration and continuity between successive Chairmanships, the Troika can ensure that long-term initiatives are sustained and that transitions between Chairmanships are smoother. This would provide the CiO with a more stable foundation to pursue multiyear strategies.

The CiO's ability to function in a polarised environment could also be improved by delegating greater authority to the OSCE Secretary General (SG) to act as a neutral and continuous mediator. The CiO often represents the interests of the Chairing state, which can create perceptions of bias or conflict of interest. Empowering the SG to take on a more central role in mediation and conflict resolution would enhance the OSCE's neutrality and credibility while allowing the CiO to focus on broader political coordination.

Another area for improvement is the CiO's engagement with non-state actors and civil society. Strengthening partnerships with NGOs, academic institutions, and the private sector could provide the CiO with additional resources and expertise, particularly in addressing emerging threats such as hybrid warfare, cybersecurity, and climate-related security risks. Engaging these stakeholders would also allow the OSCE to adapt more effectively to the complex and multifaceted nature of modern security challenges.

The effectiveness of the CiO can be significantly affected by their national policies and the geopolitical interests of their home country, which can lead to biases or shifts in the OSCE's focus. For instance, different CiOs may have varying levels of engagement with key issues based on their national interests or the international climate, which can affect the continuity and neutrality of the OSCE's interventions.

One way to address the limitations of a one-year Chairmanship is to strengthen the role of the OSCE Troika

High Commissioner on National Minorities

The High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) aims to mitigate ethnic tensions across borders and prevent conflicts in multi-ethnic societies. While doing so, it indirectly also protects the rights of minorities by promoting the integration and well-being of national minority groups within participating states. The Commissioner operates autonomously and employs a quiet diplomacy approach.

One of the HCNM's key functions is early warning. Officially the HCNM has only issued a formal early warning of conflict on two occasions: with North Macedonia and Kyrgyzstan. However, these did not yield decisive action, and the HCNM role has consequently been adapted by the post-holders to make more use of the Commissioner's relative autonomy to carry out quiet diplomacy, mediation, advice and fact-finding, rather than getting drawn into potentially divisive and unproductive discussions among participating states in Vienna.[9]

Advice and mediation to protect the rights of minorities can contribute to conflict prevention and to post-conflict peacebuilding, as the rights of national minorities often become a political issue in conflict settings; they can constitute grievances that drive disaffection and conflict; are sometimes used as a pretext for intervention; and as national minorities can find themselves scapegoated or ostracised owing to perceived links with adversary countries. For these reasons, ODIHR's work pertaining to minority rights is also highly relevant, while much of the relevant work is also done outside the OSCE by the Council of Europe.

The High Commissioner often engages with states to discuss sensitive issues like language rights, which can be potential flashpoints for conflict if not handled sensitively. For example, discussions with Ukraine about the language rights of Russian speakers have been a significant part of the HCNM's efforts to prevent tension. Yet issues related to the Russian-speaking population were used by Russia as a pretext for its actions in Crimea and Donbas.

The High Commissioner also provides advice on how to integrate societies effectively, which includes pressing minority groups themselves to engage in the broader societal fabric, such as encouraging Hungarian minority schools in Ukraine to teach both Hungarian and Ukrainian to foster better integration.

Representative for Freedom of the Media (RFOM)

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFOM) plays a critical role in promoting and safeguarding media freedom across the OSCE region. Since its establishment in 1997, the RFOM has acted as an independent watchdog, monitoring violations, providing early warnings, and advocating for the protection of journalists and freedom of expression. Over the years, the RFOM has achieved notable successes in raising awareness, fostering dialogue, and supporting reforms to improve media conditions in participating States. However, the changing media landscape and increasing threats to press freedom, including the growing trend of legal actions against journalists, pose significant challenges that require a reassessment of the RFOM's role and strategies.

The RFOM has been successful in using its platform to spotlight violations of media freedom and advocate for corrective measures. For instance, it has intervened in numerous cases where journalists faced harassment, imprisonment, or censorship, often engaging directly with governments to seek remedies. The RFOM's consistent advocacy has contributed to the release of detained journalists in several instances and has brought international attention to issues of press freedom. In the case of Turkey, for example, the RFOM has persistently highlighted concerns over the imprisonment of journalists and restrictive media laws, helping to maintain global pressure on the government to uphold its OSCE commitments.

The RFOM has also played a significant role in promoting best practices and capacity-building within the media sector. Through workshops, expert meetings, and the publication of guidelines, the RFOM has supported participating States in improving media regulation, safeguarding digital freedoms, and addressing challenges such as hate speech and misinformation.

In addition, the RFOM has been instrumental in fostering dialogue between governments, media organisations, and civil society. By organising regional conferences and facilitating discussions on contentious issues, the RFOM has helped build understanding and collaboration among stakeholders. For instance, initiatives to address the safety of female journalists and tackle online harassment have been particularly impactful, drawing attention to the gendered dimensions of threats to press freedom.

Despite these achievements, the RFOM faces significant challenges in the present-day environment. The increasing use of legal mechanisms to suppress media freedom, such as strategic lawsuits against public participation and the misuse of defamation laws, has created a chilling effect on journalism. Journalists and media outlets are frequently targeted with lawsuits designed to exhaust their resources and intimidate them into silence. This trend highlights the need for the RFOM to adapt its strategies to address these legal threats more effectively.

Recommendations

To enhance its effectiveness in this environment, the RFOM could take a more proactive approach in advocating for legal reforms. This might involve working closely with participating States to review and revise defamation laws, ensuring they align with international standards and cannot be used to suppress legitimate journalism. The RFOM could also provide technical assistance to governments and legislatures to develop legal frameworks that protect journalists from frivolous lawsuits and safeguard investigative reporting.

The RFOM could expand its support for journalists facing legal threats by establishing a specialised legal assistance programme. This programme could offer legal advice, funding for legal defence, and access to a network of pro bono lawyers experienced in media law. Such an initiative would empower journalists to resist attempts to silence them through litigation and help preserve the integrity of investigative journalism.

The RFOM could take a more proactive approach in advocating for legal reforms.

The RFOM's role in raising awareness remains crucial. It should continue to use its platform to highlight the dangers posed by legal harassment of journalists, ensuring that these issues remain high on the international agenda. Public campaigns, reports, and high-profile interventions can help mobilise political will and resources to address these challenges.

On the other hand, some interviewed experts expressed a more pessimistic view of this tool. The concept of freedom of the media, promoted post-Helsinki 1992 by American NGOs and Congress's Helsinki Committee, faces substantial challenges that cast doubt on its future viability within the OSCE framework. Although this tool initially gained serious, it has always encountered problems from countries from a whole spectrum of countries that are reluctant to (fully embrace) transparent media practices.

The current climate in the U.S., which has shifted towards a more isolationist and domestically focused stance, further complicates the prospects for robust international advocacy of media freedom. This changing mood suggests a possible reduction in the prioritisation of media freedom initiatives within international bodies, including the OSCE.

Moreover, there's been a noticeable regression in media freedom globally, driven by massive economic interests that affect media integrity and independence. This widespread decline makes it increasingly challenging to invest political energy and resources in this area, as the returns are diminishing and the resistance is growing.

In response to these challenges, there might be a strategic pivot towards newer domains, such as oversight of social media and internet-based media platforms. The idea would be to adapt the tool to the contemporary media landscape where concepts of "absolute freedom", popularised by figures like Elon Musk, dominate discussions. This shift in focus could keep the initiative relevant and responsive to the evolving media environment.

Conflict Prevention Centre

The OSCE Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC) is a cornerstone of the organisation's conflict prevention and crisis management efforts, playing a pivotal role in supporting participating States and field operations in addressing security challenges. Established in 1990, the CPC provides operational and analytical support for early warning, conflict resolution, and post-conflict rehabilitation. Over the years, it has achieved significant successes in deploying field operations, facilitating dialogue, and managing crises, demonstrating its capacity to address complex conflicts across the OSCE region. Key CPC instruments include the Situation Room, the Mediation Support Team and the Network of Focal Points for Security Sector Reform and Governance in OSCE bodies.[10]

Assessment

In Tajikistan during the late 1990s, the CPC demonstrated its value in post-conflict environments. After the country's civil war, the CPC coordinated OSCE field operations to support the disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) of former combatants. It also worked to strengthen democratic institutions and promote human rights, contributing to long-term stability.

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The CPC has also played a critical role in facilitating dialogue and confidence-building measures in protracted conflicts. For instance, the CPC supported the negotiation processes in the 5+2 talks on the Transnistrian conflict, where it acted as a neutral facilitator to help the parties agree on practical measures to improve the daily lives of people in the region. Similarly, in the South Caucasus, the CPC has contributed to building platforms for dialogue, fostering communication among conflicting parties in Nagorno-Karabakh, and supporting regional confidence-building initiatives.

In addition to its conflict resolution efforts, the CPC has been effective in developing, implementing and coordinating early-warning mechanisms to identify and address potential crises before they escalate. Through its analysis and reporting systems, the CPC provides participating States with timely and accurate assessments of emerging security risks, such as the deterioration of political stability in the Western Balkans or rising tensions in Central Asia. These early-warning capabilities have been instrumental in guiding OSCE decision-making and preventive diplomacy.

Despite these successes, the CPC faces significant challenges in the current geopolitical climate. The increasing polarisation among participating States has made it difficult for the CPC to operate effectively, particularly in conflicts where major powers are deeply divided, such as the war in Ukraine. Political divisions within the OSCE often delay decision-making and limit the CPC's ability to act swiftly. Additionally, the CPC's reliance on consensus among participating States for many of its actions means that it is frequently constrained by the lack of agreement among key stakeholders.

The CPC's capacity is also limited by resource constraints. Operating with a modest budget and relying on voluntary contributions, the CPC often struggles to meet the growing demands of its mandate. This lack of resources hinders its ability to scale up operations or address multiple crises simultaneously.

Recommendations

To better address these challenges, the CPC could benefit from reforms that enhance its autonomy and operational flexibility. Empowering the CPC to act more independently, particularly in early-warning and preventive diplomacy, could enable it to respond more effectively to emerging crises. For example, granting the CPC greater authority to initiate fact-finding missions or propose mediation efforts without requiring full consensus from participating States would improve its ability to address urgent security challenges.

Strengthening the CPC's partnerships with other international organisations, such as the United Nations, NATO, and the European Union, could also enhance its capacity to manage crises. Collaborative initiatives, such as joint early-warning systems or coordinated responses to conflicts, would allow the CPC to leverage external resources and expertise.

The CPC will also increasingly need to focus on adapting to new security threats, such as hybrid warfare, cyber threats, and climate-related instability. For instance, it has convened workshops on AI

and arms control in collaboration with South Korea. By integrating these dimensions into its early-warning and conflict prevention strategies, the CPC can ensure it remains relevant in addressing contemporary security challenges.

The CPC's capacity to foster trust and dialogue remains critical in the current polarised environment. To this end, the CPC could expand its use of informal dialogue platforms and confidence-building measures, creating spaces where participating States can engage constructively outside formal negotiation processes.

Network of OSCE Early Warning Focal Points in Executive Structures

The Network of OSCE Early Warning Focal Points in Executive Structures is an integral part of the OSCE's conflict prevention mechanism, designed to strengthen coordination and information-sharing among the organisation's institutions. Its primary objective is to detect and respond to emerging crises in a timely and efficient manner, ensuring that potential conflicts are identified and addressed before they escalate. Assessing the effectiveness of this network involves examining its ability to collect and analyse data, facilitate communication, and influence decision-making processes within the OSCE.

Assessment

The network has been particularly effective in fostering cooperation and coordination across OSCE executive structures. By connecting focal points from field operations, the Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC), and other key institutions, the network provides a platform for sharing information and expertise. This integration has improved the OSCE's ability to identify early warning signs of instability, particularly in regions prone to conflict. Notably, the network's early reporting on deteriorating conditions in Eastern Ukraine in 2013 helped to enable the OSCE to mobilise resources and deploy the Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) in 2014.

Another key strength of the network is its capacity to streamline communication between the OSCE Secretariat and field missions. The focal points serve as conduits for information flow, ensuring that ground-level developments are promptly communicated to decision-makers in Vienna. This has been particularly valuable in conflict-prone areas such as the Western Balkans and Central Asia, where timely updates have supported preventive diplomacy and confidence-building measures.

However, the network's effectiveness is not without challenges. One limitation is its dependence on the capacity and expertise of individual focal points, which can vary significantly across executive structures. In some cases, focal points may lack the resources, training, or institutional support needed to perform their roles effectively. This inconsistency can hinder the network's ability to deliver high-quality and timely analyses.

Another issue is the limited integration of the network's outputs into OSCE decision-making processes. While the network excels at collecting and sharing information, its insights are not always translated into concrete actions. Political divisions among participating States often impede the OSCE's ability to act on early

The network has been particularly effective in fostering cooperation and coordination across OSCE executive structures.

warnings, reducing the impact of the network's efforts – as with warnings about rising tensions in Nagorno-Karabakh before the 2020 escalation.

The network also faces challenges in addressing emerging threats such as cyberattacks, hybrid warfare, and climate-related instability. Its focus remains largely on traditional indicators of conflict, leaving gaps in its ability to anticipate and respond to modern security risks. Expanding the network's analytical framework to include these dimensions would enhance its relevance in a rapidly evolving security environment.

Recommendations

To improve its effectiveness, the network could benefit from additional training and capacity-building for focal points. This would ensure that all members are equipped with the skills and tools needed to perform their roles effectively. Strengthening partnerships with external organisations, such as regional think tanks or international NGOs, could also enhance the network's analytical capabilities and provide fresh perspectives on complex security challenges.

Another area for improvement is the integration of the network's outputs into OSCE policy-making. Developing more structured mechanisms for linking early warning analyses with concrete actions would ensure that the network's efforts translate into tangible outcomes. This might include creating a dedicated task force within the OSCE to act on the network's findings or enhancing the CPC's role in coordinating responses to identified risks.

OSCE Parliamentary Assembly

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (PA) serves as the parliamentary dimension of the OSCE, tasked with fostering dialogue among participating states' parliamentarians, providing oversight of OSCE activities, and promoting the implementation of OSCE commitments. Since its establishment in 1991, the OSCE PA has played an important role in complementing the organisation's work, particularly in areas such as election observation, advancing democratic principles, and fostering multilateral dialogue, all of which can contribute to conflict prevention and peacebuilding in the largest sense. Specifically on conflict issues, it has a mandate to develop and promote mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflicts. However, its effectiveness has varied across different contexts and periods, influenced by the political will of participating States and the broader geopolitical environment.

Assessment

The PA has contributed to advancing human rights and democratic reforms through its annual declarations and resolutions. For example, the PA's consistent focus on media freedom, gender equality, and minority rights has encouraged participating States to align their domestic policies with OSCE principles. Its 2012 Monaco Declaration, which emphasised the importance of combating human trafficking, led to greater focus on the issue across OSCE institutions, influencing both policy and operational priorities.

Despite these achievements, the OSCE PA has faced significant limitations in its ability to influence meaningful change. One persistent challenge is its lack of binding authority; its recommendations and resolutions are non-binding, and their implementation depends entirely on the political will of participating States. For instance, despite repeated calls from the PA for greater action to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, little progress has been made, as the PA's influence is constrained by entrenched geopolitical rivalries among participating states.

Another limitation is the PA's struggle to maintain unity and relevance in an increasingly polarised geopolitical environment. For example, during the 2014 Ukraine crisis, divisions among participating states hampered the PA's ability to issue unified statements, reflecting broader splits within the OSCE. This fragmentation undermines the PA's credibility as a forum for consensus-building and weakens its capacity to promote collective action.

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (PA)'s involvement in election observation missions, while an important aspect of its work, has often been a source of controversy, particularly in its collaboration with the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). The controversy stems from differing approaches between the two bodies: the ODIHR prioritises technical and methodologically rigorous assessments of elections, while the PA has sometimes been criticised for politicising its statements, which risks undermining the credibility and impartiality of election observation missions.

- One notable example of this tension occurred during the 2010 presidential elections in Ukraine. While the ODIHR provided a measured assessment focused on the technical aspects of the electoral process, including adherence to international standards and the overall fairness of the vote, some OSCE PA representatives issued public statements that were viewed as politically charged. These statements focused on broader geopolitical considerations, which raised concerns about the potential compromise of the technical findings of the ODIHR mission. This divergence created confusion about the OSCE's overall stance and raised questions about the credibility of its election observation mission.

- A similar issue arose during the 2015 parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan. While the ODIHR declined to send a full observation mission due to restrictions imposed by the Azerbaijani government, the OSCE PA decided to proceed with a smaller delegation. The PA's post-election statements were criticised for being overly conciliatory towards the Azerbaijani authorities, contrasting with ODIHR's more critical stance regarding the lack of democratic standards. This inconsistency between the two bodies was widely perceived as undermining the OSCE's unified approach to election observation and diminishing its impact.

- Another instance of contention was observed in the Kazakhstan 2015 presidential elections, where the OSCE PA delegation's statements focused heavily on political interpretations of the election, including discussions of regional stability and Kazakhstan's broader role in the OSCE. These remarks were seen as overshadowing ODIHR's detailed technical analysis,

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's involvement in election observation missions, while an important aspect of its work, has often been a source of controversy

To enhance its effectiveness, the OSCE PA could expand its engagement with civil society, academic institutions, and the private sector

which highlighted significant restrictions on media freedom, the lack of genuine political competition, and other systemic issues affecting the integrity of the electoral process.

Such examples highlight a recurring challenge in the OSCE's election observation work: the difficulty of reconciling the PA's political orientation with ODIHR's technical and methodological rigor. The PA's tendency to make broader political statements has sometimes detracted from the credibility of election observation missions, creating confusion about the OSCE's findings and leaving it vulnerable to accusations of bias or inconsistency.

Recommendations

To address these issues, greater coordination and clarity of roles between the PA and ODIHR are essential. Clear protocols should be established to ensure that the PA's involvement in election observation does not conflict with or overshadow ODIHR's technical assessments. This could involve delineating responsibilities more explicitly, with the ODIHR focusing on the technical aspects of elections and the PA playing a supporting role in promoting parliamentary dialogue about electoral reform. Enhanced communication and collaboration between the two bodies would help present a unified OSCE position, maintaining the credibility and impact of its election observation missions.

To enhance its effectiveness, the OSCE PA could expand its engagement with civil society, academic institutions, and the private sector, drawing on external expertise to address complex security challenges. Strengthening its collaboration with other OSCE institutions, such as the Secretariat and the Conflict Prevention Centre, would also improve its ability to align parliamentary initiatives with broader organisational priorities. Furthermore, increasing the PA's visibility and outreach efforts could mobilise greater public and political support for its activities, amplifying its impact on participating States.

Peace/Field Operations

Long-Term Programmatic Engagement and Quick Impact Projects

OSCE field offices play a critical role in advancing OSCE commitments through implementing practical actions on the ground, such as promoting human rights, conflict resolution, and democratic reforms, contributing to broader long-term peace-building across the three dimensions. They have a vital role in the OSCE's early-warning capabilities.

Assessment

OSCE field missions are particularly valuable in advancing initiatives on the ground, often aligning with and expanding upon the efforts of organisations such as the United Nations, the Council of Europe (CoE), and the European Union. An additional value of OSCE field missions is their ability to build trust with local governments and civil society on the ground, which is harder to achieve if an organisation lacks local representation.

The UN, with its global reach and comprehensive mandates, often sets priorities that OSCE missions adapt locally, such as in the areas of environmental protection or sustainable economic development. For example, following UN guidelines, OSCE missions might focus on promoting renewable energy projects and enhancing local capacities to manage natural resources sustainably.

Similarly, the CoE, with its expertise in human rights and democracy promotion, along with the OSCE, sets a comprehensive framework within which both entities operate to enhance these principles regionally. For example, in areas like judicial reform, the CoE may outline the standards while OSCE and its field offices facilitate the practical application and local adaptation of these standards.

The work of OSCE field missions is also instrumental in supporting the European Union's efforts, particularly in assisting countries to develop and implement reforms necessary for meeting the acquis communautaire.

However, the OSCE field offices face growing uncertainty in some quarters as increasing pressure from host countries threatens their continued operation. Some participating States are pushing to close these missions, citing concerns such as stigmatisation – implying that the country is not developed or stable enough to manage its own affairs – or "interference in internal affairs", labelling field operations as "nests of spies" or opposing specific projects that may challenge political or economic interests.

Recommendations

These issues are often compounded by the structure of OSCE field missions. Mission heads are often seconded and funded by their home countries, leading to perceptions of divided loyalties or national biases. This undermines the missions' credibility and fuels arguments against their presence. A possible reform could involve transitioning mission heads to contracted positions employed directly by the OSCE, which could strengthen trust in the impartiality of field missions.

> **OSCE field offices play a critical role in advancing OSCE commitments through implementing practical actions on the ground**

The OSCE should consider how it can adapt to such shifting dynamics and maintain its impact without relying on field missions. This might involve strengthening regional cooperation frameworks through enhancing the systems for information sharing, developing joint projects or programmes that benefit multiple countries, and providing resources for capacity building to bolster institutional capabilities. Additionally, deploying assessment or fact-finding teams for short-term engagements, or enhancing its capacity for remote monitoring and dialogue facilitation could further extend its effectiveness.

Peacekeeping

At the 1992 Helsinki CSCE summit, participating States agreed on the possibility of sending peacekeepers to conflict zones. Although the OSCE never followed through on this, several of its activities – such as civilian and military monitoring missions – fit the

UN definition of peace operations. Examples include the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (2014 – 2022), the Kosovo Verification Mission (1998-1999) and the Border Monitoring Mission (1999-2004) on the Russia-Georgia border. These missions were also deployed alongside multilateral peacekeeping operations containing military components, to support the implementation of peace agreements.

Assessment

In 2002, the OSCE undertook a comprehensive review of its military peacekeeping capabilities as outlined in the 1992 Helsinki Document. The review concluded that while the OSCE possesses significant experience in deploying unarmed missions, it lacks experience in conducting armed peacekeeping operations. Additionally, it was acknowledged that the OSCE Secretariat has the capacity to collaborate effectively with other international organisations which deploy military peacekeeping operations. The review also revealed the absence of a consensus on key issues such as command and control structures, the role of the Forum for Security Co-operation, and the OSCE's overall operational capacity for military peacekeeping.

The OSCE's civilian peacekeeping activities, particularly verification and monitoring efforts carried out by OSCE-mandated international police forces, remain a vital aspect of the OSCE's conflict resolution tools. These activities also encompass the work of civilian observers, border monitors, and specialists in areas such as the rule of law, human rights, disarmament, democratisation, and security sector reform. Such efforts were pivotal to the OSCE's operations in Southeast Europe during the 1990s and continue to play a significant role in its work today.

Short-Term Deployments

Expert and Fact-Finding Missions

Assessment

The OSCE's use of fact-finding missions is an essential component of its conflict resolution and crisis management strategies. The tool plays an important role in expertly assessing the situation on the ground, providing impartial findings and recommendations to improve situations of concern, while also aiming to ensure accountability for responsible states and individuals.

Such missions empower local actors, particularly human rights defenders, by supporting their work and amplifying their voices. Although justice may be slow to follow, the evidence gathered by impartial international missions can serve as robust data for future litigation.

It is, however, important to establish effective follow-up mechanisms to ensure that findings and recommendations are addressed and implemented within the OSCE and particularly in those states where concerns have arisen. The main challenge often lies in the lack of political will, or inadequate capacity, among some participating States to implement further action; remedies are frequently limited to naming and shaming.

This tool also requires careful coordination with other international organisations, as diverse fact-finding and investigative activities with overlapping mandates can lead to fatigue among those most affected and may even result in the re-traumatisation of victims.

Recommendations

To address these challenges, particularly in contexts of armed conflict and mass atrocities, efficient coordination and data sharing among mechanisms are essential. Establishing centralised inventories of collected data, managed by a trusted institution like the OSCE, could streamline efforts. Such institutions should ensure full respect for personal data and privacy while facilitating data sharing with relevant mechanisms when appropriate.

Fact-finding missions also serve as a mechanism for the OSCE to engage actively in areas experiencing or at risk of conflict. Such missions can include assessments by expert teams and may involve various functions, such as monitoring ceasefires, facilitating prisoner exchanges, or ensuring humanitarian access.

The ability to deploy these missions quickly and adapt their objectives to the specific requirements of the situation makes them a versatile tool within the OSCE's toolkit. However, the effectiveness of these missions can be hampered by the political dynamics within the OSCE, where consensus among participating states is often necessary to launch and sustain operations.

The OSCE's flexibility and relatively low cost compared to other international organisations enable it to initiate such missions rapidly, drawing on a roster of experts and a system of secondments from member states. This agility allows the OSCE to respond to crises effectively, although the scope of these missions is sometimes limited by the resources available and the political will of the participating states.

> **To address these challenges, particularly in contexts of armed conflict and mass atrocities, efficient coordination and data sharing among mechanisms are essential.**

To enhance the impact and efficiency of fact-finding missions, the OSCE could consider granting more autonomy to the Conflict Prevention Centre to conduct independent assessments and provide recommendations directly to the Permanent Council. This would reduce bureaucratic delays and allow for a more timely and effective response to emerging crises.

Expert comment

"Any fact-finding mission in current circumstances would need to be agreed. Chairmanship would have to consult on its terms of reference and then it would be 'killed'. Better to put this on the shoulders of the SG in an early warning function but ask it to come up with some recommendations. The OSCE documents do not allow the SG to set up fact-finding missions but it would be a good way to depoliticise it."

General Tools

Groups of Friends offer a small, informal, but structured and focused setting to address conflict resolution.

Special/Personal Representatives (of the CiO)

These can be highly effective, but their effectiveness in specific conflict cases will also relate closely to the mandate and focus given by the CiO. Currently the special representatives all have a thematic focus apart from the special representative project co-ordinator in Ukraine. They can be useful interlocutors with other international organisations that have appointed special representatives or envoys on similar issues (for instance NATO on women, peace and security).

Groups of Friends

Unlike the Structured Dialogue, OSCE Groups of Friends (GoF) are informal and ad hoc. They work on, raise awareness of and prepare informal and formal OSCE decisions on specific topics (e.g. GoF including GoF on Safety of Journalists, GoF on Youth and Security, GoF on Children and Armed Conflict, GoF of Georgia).

Assessment

Groups of Friends offer a small, informal, but structured and focused setting to address conflict resolution. This format allows for in-depth exploration of the complexities of a conflict while providing opportunities for mediation and constructive dialogue among key parties involved. Such a format can serve as a platform to broker initial informal agreements, laying the groundwork for more formal negotiations.

For example, the Groups of Friends format proved invaluable in supporting the OSCE's efforts to implement the military and arms control aspects of the Dayton Accords in the Balkans. The success of the Groups of Friends was the result of a clear mandate, strong international consensus, and effective coordination among influential states. The GoF format worked because it combined political will, technical expertise, and a focused agenda, allowing the OSCE to implement practical measures that contributed to regional stability.

For example, the GoF format was tasked with implementing specific and well-defined elements of the Dayton Accords, such as military stabilisation, arms control, and confidence-building measures. These objectives were concrete and actionable, allowing the OSCE and the GoF to focus on technical and operational aspects rather than getting bogged down in political disputes. This clarity of purpose enabled the GoF to concentrate on implementation rather than negotiation. Similarly, the Dayton Accords had broad international backing, particularly from key global powers, including the United States, European Union member states, and Russia. This consensus provided the necessary political will and resources for the GoF to operate effectively.

Unlike in other conflicts where major powers have conflicting interests, the Balkan situation saw alignment among influential actors, which created a more stable environment for the OSCE to work.

At the same time, Groups of Friends may have limitations, especially when geopolitical tensions are high. For example, the 5+2 talks on the Transnistrian settlement process, while having

helped establish and implement practical measures to improve the daily lives of people, have not achieved their ultimate goal of resolving the Transnistrian conflict. Similarly, in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Russia-brokered peace deal of November 2020 sidelined the OSCE's Minsk Group.

The failures of these frameworks often stem from a combination of geopolitical tensions, entrenched mistrust, and the lack of enforceable authority.

In the case of the Transnistrian settlement process, the 5+2 talks have made progress on practical issues to improve the daily lives of people in the region, such as resolving technical disputes and easing border crossings. However, they have fallen short of achieving a comprehensive political resolution to the conflict. The underlying issue is that the key stakeholders—Moldova, Transnistria, Russia, Ukraine, and the mediators (OSCE, the EU, and the US)—have competing interests and divergent visions for the region's future. For example, while Moldova aims to reintegrate Transnistria under its sovereignty, Russia supports the region as a strategic foothold and prefers the status quo. This impasse prevents the talks from addressing core political and security questions.

Similarly, in Nagorno-Karabakh, the OSCE's Minsk Group, co-chaired by Russia, France, and the United States, was sidelined by the Russia-brokered peace deal of November 2020. The Minsk Group's limitations were highlighted by its inability to prevent or stop the 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The root cause of this failure lies in geopolitical rivalries and the lack of unity among the co-chairs. Russia acted unilaterally to secure a ceasefire that reinforced its influence in the region, bypassing the OSCE framework entirely. This sidelining demonstrates how the geopolitical agendas of powerful states can undermine multilateral efforts.

Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)

The ODIHR is the main OSCE institution that works in the so-called third – Human --dimension of the OSCE, which focuses on promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law throughout the OSCE area. Established in 199, the ODIHR is perhaps best known for its role in monitoring elections, a key aspect of its efforts to strengthen democratic institutions and governance. Additionally, it works on a range of human rights activities, including promoting freedom of religion and protecting the rights of national minorities and other vulnerable groups.

Assessment

Many experts believe that the OSCE's human dimension is a cornerstone of the Organisation's work, as it embeds human rights, democratic governance and the rule of law into the wider security agenda. The human dimension also provides a platform for dialogue, fosters accountability and supports participating States in implementing commitments that enhance human security.

Many experts believe that the OSCE's human dimension is a cornerstone of the Organisation's work

However, the human dimension faces significant challenges, first and foremost, political disagreements among participating States on the value and priorities of the human dimension. These differences often manifest in debates over funding, mandates and the scope of activities, with some States questioning the focus on human rights or democratic governance. This lack of consensus undermines the OSCE's ability to act decisively and limits the effectiveness of its initiatives.

Recommendations

To overcome its challenges, the OSCE must take steps to sustain its focus and effectiveness. First, it should strengthen mechanisms to engage civil society organisations, which are important for monitoring and implementation, even in politically sensitive environments. Second, the OSCE should prioritise regular assessments of its initiatives to identify areas where its capacities can be most impactful. For instance, addressing gaps in local implementation or providing specialised training in emerging areas of need could help the OSCE stand out.

The human dimension is also an area on which other multilateral organisations focus, such as the Council of Europe, the European Union and the UN. It is essential to collaborate with them to avoid redundancy and maximise impact, particularly in post-conflict settings where multiple actors are working on reconstruction and reform. For example, the judicial reforms area requires careful coordination to prevent doubling efforts or creating inefficiencies, such as training judges on similar topics by multiple organisations.

To address this, the OSCE could focus on identifying niche issues that are underserved by other organisations. For example, the OSCE could take a leadership role in exploring innovative solutions to judicial corruption or developing targeted support for post-conflict societies.

Monitoring and observation

Election observation missions in participating States are the main activity of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). The ODIHR has developed a robust and comprehensive methodology to assess whether an election has met the OSCE standards for free and fair elections as set out in the OSCE 1990 Copenhagen Document.

Assessment

This methodology has a global reputation and consists of both long-term observation of a full election cycle, including the election campaign, administration and legislation, media coverage and the adjudication of complaints, as well as in-depth and geographically wide short-term observation around election day. The OSCE also publishes comprehensive election monitoring reports in which it identifies shortcomings and sets out recommendations for improvements. Such reports are read widely by the participating States and other stakeholders, including domestic audiences and international organisations, and serve both as a reference point and a basis for further action. Sometimes the ODIHR findings are the only authoritative and detailed source of information on the conduct of elections.

The ODIHR also supports the work of domestic election monitors as well as national efforts to improve their election laws and practices. It also provides training and guidelines and publishes handbooks on a wide array of election-related matters.

ODIHR recommendations have contributed to electoral improvements in many OSCE countries, for example, in the Western Balkans, where over half of these recommendations have been implemented, and in Russia, which, according to an estimate, has fully or partially implemented nearly half of ODIHR's 139 recommendations since 2004. Nevertheless, these reforms highlight that while authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes may adopt changes to enhance the perceived credibility of elections, they resist reforms that could alter the balance of power.

The OSCE is unable to deploy observers without an invitation from the host authorities, who can also restrict the number of observers and the scope of their work. Experts point out that authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes frequently manipulate elections before the arrival of observers, employing tactics such as marginalising opposition candidates, suppressing independent media or exploiting electronic and postal voting mechanisms. However, limited financial resources available to the OSCE and its participating States further constrain the duration and effectiveness of election observation missions. Stronger collaboration between ODIHR and the OSCE PA would also be necessary to safeguard the impartiality of ODIHR's findings.

Legal Opinions

OSCE's legal opinions and comments, provided mostly through the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, guide participating States in bringing their domestic legislations in line with OSCE commitments and international human rights standards.

Assessment

ODIHR's reviews focus on election and media laws, judicial independence and anti-discrimination legislation, while the HCNM offers legal opinions related to protecting the rights of ethnic minorities and promoting social cohesion and stability (e.g. participation of minorities in public life, language rights in education, media and public administration, etc.).

Such recommendations are advisory, and their implementation depends on the political will of participating States. Notwithstanding that, by encouraging compliance with OSCE commitments, OSCE legal opinions influence domestic public debates and can advance constitutional reforms and legislative amendments and improve judicial decisions.

Recommendations

The OSCE could also focus on building capacity by providing technical assistance or training to States with limited legal expertise and establishing follow-up mechanisms to monitor implementation and ensure accountability. It would be beneficial if ODIHR's legal opinions could be requested with the support of State delegations in Vienna, OSCE field missions or the OSCE

Parliamentary Assembly, as the current mechanism allows only States to request reviews, and few do so.

Human Dimension Implementation Meeting/Warsaw Human Dimension Conference

The last Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) was held in 2019. The lack of recent meetings can be attributed first to the covid pandemic and then to political disagreements, which led to the lack of consensus on PC decisions, the HDIM was replaced with the Warsaw Human Dimension Conference (WHDC) under the auspices of the CiO.

Assessment

The WHDC was initiated as a response to the need for maintaining discussions on the OSCE human dimension, but owing to the lack of a mandate, it has limited backing from some States. It also places less formal emphasis on implementation reviews of the human dimension commitments and focuses more on broader human rights, rule of law and democracy discussions.

Recommendations

In an environment in which the return to the HDIM is impossible, the WHDC must continue to take place and receive formal backing and organisational support from the OSCE leadership and those participating States who strive to adhere to the OSCE human dimension commitments. It would be advisable to move the autumn dates to springtime so as not to overlap with sessions of the UN Human Rights Council, which stretches the capacity of participating States thin. Altering the format of discussions so that more time is allocated to both a panel discussion and Q&A would provide a better opportunity for identifying problems and offering solutions.

Economic and Environmental Dimension Implementation Meeting (EEDIM)

The Economic and Environmental Dimension Implementation Meeting (EEDIM), held annually by the OSCE, is a platform for assessing the implementation of commitments made by OSCE participating States in environmental and economic domains. These meetings not only review past initiatives but also set the stage for future cooperative efforts to address shared challenges across the so-called Second Dimension of the OSCE.

Assessment

The EEDIM has been effective in facilitating dialogue and collaboration among participating States on key thematic areas like water management, gender equality in economic participation, and sustainable environmental practices. For instance, recent meetings have focused on enhancing women's roles in the economy and managing environmental resources more sustainably.

For example, the 2024 meeting concentrated significantly on water management, highlighting the OSCE's commitment to tackling this critical issue amid global environmental challenges. Innovative approaches were also evident, such as integrating gender equality

into water diplomacy, highlighted by initiatives like "Womenomics" discussed during the 2019 EEDIM. The 2023 EEDIM underscored the importance of good governance and combating corruption within the environmental sector.

EEDIM plays an important role in aligning OSCE participating States around tackling environmental and economic challenges like climate change and energy issues. It brings together experts, policymakers, and other key stakeholders to exchange knowledge and brainstorm on complex issues that straddle the intersection of economics and the environment.

However, the OSCE lacks significant funds to deploy for economic development, and as a result, participating states tend to be more aware of, and engaged with, other multilateral organisations that bring funding, above all the EU and UN. International financial institutions and development banks also have a significant role to play in this arena, but their role is different because they do not have mandates to address political and security issues. Field offices illustrate the ad-hoc nature of the OSCE's involvement in economic issues, which is heavily dependent on the willingness of OSCE participating States to provide staff and support. Nonetheless, there is some interest, for example in Central Asia and the Balkans, in benefitting from OSCE capacity-building, and the OSCE's ability to encourage regional cooperation.

Compared to the economic aspect, the environmental dimension is somewhat easier to mobilise and discuss within the OSCE framework. The environmental sector benefits from a broader base of global concern, which facilitates discussion on semi-global issues like pollution and cross-border regulation of hazardous substances. Historical activities suggest that the OSCE has been more proactive and successful in addressing environmental issues compared to economic ones, likely due to the universal urgency and tangible impact of environmental challenges.

Conclusions

OSCE tools – ranging from diplomatic engagement mechanisms to detailed monitoring and reporting processes – provide the Organisation with methods to support adherence to its foundational principles, including a comprehensive concept of security. The OSCE Toolbox should not be used mechanistically, however. The OSCE's approach to any conflict usually combines a mixing and matching of existing tools, with a great degree of flexibility. Both the selection and effectiveness of these tools are subject to the specific needs of the situation at hand.

Comprehensive monitoring missions not only observe and report on elections, human rights situations, and military activities but also highlight deviations from the OSCE commitments. These observations are important the diplomatic dialogues that follow, aiming to rectify non-compliance. Specialised roles, including the High Commissioner on National Minorities and the Special Representative for Freedom of the Media, help to safeguard minority rights and media freedom, addressing specific areas of concern. The OSCE's field operations extend direct support to participating States, offering training and assistance, with the view to upholding the rule of law and human rights.

The OSCE's established track record in shaping international norms is well exemplified by its foundational documents, such as the Helsinki Final Act, the Vienna Document, and the Copenhagen Document. These seminal texts have historically set benchmarks for state behaviour in the realms of security, human rights, and the rule of law across the OSCE region. This legacy of norm-setting provides a robust foundation for the OSCE to extend its expertise into emerging security challenges, such as regulating the use of Artificial Intelligence in conflict and managing the proliferation of autonomous drones.

Similarly, tools such as the Open Skies Treaty highlight the OSCE's potential for future arms control and confidence-building discussions, while its human dimension handbooks, for example, those on developing human rights and rule-of-law-compliant criminal procedure codes, remain critical for ensuring fair due process and empowering human rights defenders.

Central to the OSCE's mission remains its role in mediation, which is essential for conflict prevention, resolution, and sustainable peacebuilding. By offering inclusive approaches to address specific regional challenges, the OSCE can help de-escalate tensions and foster trust between conflicting parties. Alongside mediation, thanks to the OSCE's reputation in post-conflict rehabilitation, the Organisation would be well-placed to manage future reconciliation processes.

Despite these strengths, the visibility of the OSCE has diminished over time. To counter this, the Organisation must highlight its most successful examples of work and impact. Focusing on cross-cutting issues – like the interplay between human rights, climate change, and technology – can demonstrate the OSCE's adaptability to modern challenges. Amplifying successes in post-conflict rehabilitation or its innovative work on trafficking and minority rights can showcase the OSCE's notable contributions to peace and security.

The visibility of the OSCE has diminished over time. To counter this, the Organisation must highlight its most successful examples of work and impact.

However, the ongoing war in Ukraine and other unresolved conflicts within the OSCE region starkly demonstrate the limitations of the OSCE tools when there is a lack of political will to implement them. This paramount problem underscores the difficulty of promoting peace and comprehensive security in a non-cooperative environment. Such a situation presents a profound dilemma for the OSCE and its participating States, as there are no straightforward solutions to effectively address such deep-rooted political and security issues within its framework.

Discussions about how best to enhance its Toolbox will continue within the OSCE. Whether by making greater use of existing mechanisms or developing new approaches to address emerging challenges, this dialogue underscores the OSCE's commitment to adapting its tools and strategies to remain relevant.

Recommen-dations

These recommendations aim to bolster the OSCE's Toolbox for addressing the dynamic challenges of today's geopolitical environment and enhance its efficacy in conflict prevention and resolution.

It should be emphasised, however, that the effectiveness of the OSCE tools often depends on political will. First and foremost, the OSCE participating States should work towards fostering stronger adherence to the OSCE commitments that they undertook, in order to utilise the Toolbox effectively.

Modernise tools

The OSCE could focus on updating its instruments to address contemporary security challenges more effectively. This includes integrating modern technology in areas like cyber security, unmanned systems, and space-related security technologies, which are becoming increasingly significant in modern conflict scenarios.

Enhance legal framework and compliance

The OSCE should consider ways to back recommendations from its assessment and fact-finding missions as well as legal reviews and opinions, by more robust mechanisms to enhance compliance, especially in countries with a limited capacity to adopt reforms independently.

Enhance transparency and communication

There is a need to enhance the transparency of military activities and communication between OSCE states. The OSCE could implement more robust verification and reporting systems to ensure that the data provided by member states is both timely and accurate.

Revamp engagement formats

Adopting innovative engagement formats, such as combining formal plenary sessions with smaller, focused workshops, could enhance dialogue and consensus-building among participating States. This could be particularly useful in contentious or complex security discussions

Enhance capacity-building

Strengthening the capacity of participating states is crucial. The OSCE should consider investing in training and resources to beef up local capacities for early warning, conflict prevention, and crisis management.

Enhance inter-agency cooperation

Improving coordination with other international and regional organisations can amplify the OSCE's impact. By aligning efforts with those of the UN, EU, and other regional bodies, the OSCE can avoid duplication of efforts and strengthen the collective security framework.

Enhance focus on cybersecurity and non-traditional threats

Broaden the scope of the Structured Dialogue to include emerging security challenges such as cybersecurity, hybrid threats, and the implications of new technologies. This involves integrating discussions on economic instability, environmental degradation, and the impact of climate change on security.

Strengthen early warning mechanisms

The OSCE's early warning mechanisms could be improved by including more informal and regular early warning discussions could help in addressing conflicts before they escalate. Giving more autonomy to the Conflict Prevention Centre for independent assessments and recommendations could also enhance responsiveness.

Strengthen other conflict prevention mechanisms

The OSCE could consider enhancing the autonomy of the Conflict Prevention Centre to conduct independent assessments and provide timely recommendations directly to the Permanent Council to improve the speed and effectiveness of responses to emerging crises.

Maintain focus on the Human Dimension

A sustained focus on the Human Dimension could help identify further areas of impact, through engagement with civil society and prioritising regular assessments of initiatives. Collaborating closely with other multilateral organisations can maximise impact and avoid redundancy, especially in post-conflict settings. The Warsaw Human Dimension Conference should aim to include implementation reviews of human dimension commitments in order to foster discussions on broader human rights, rule of law, and democracy issues to strengthen OSCE's role in promoting comprehensive security.

Strengthen election monitoring

The effectiveness of election observation missions can be enhanced by ensuring they have the resources and political backing to operate independently of host state restrictions. This includes improving collaboration between ODIHR and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly to safeguard the impartiality of findings.

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3   Indeed, some measures are explicitly patterned on the Vienna document but with the idea that they can be made more frequent and reinforced with additional information and processes.

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Annex: OSCE Toolbox effectiveness

Click below to view the OSCE Toolbox effectiveness table:

https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/OSCE-report-Annex.pdf

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