



ADAPTING CO-OPERATIVE SECURITY: THE OSCE'S CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN A FRAGMENTED WORLD

Fred Tanner

About the Author



Image credit: OSCE/Micky Kroell

FRED TANNER

Fred Tanner (Ambassador, ret.) is Visiting Professor at the Geneva Graduate Institute and Faculty Associate at its Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP). He is currently a Senior Advisor at the Centre for Strategic Analysis (CSA) in Vienna and an Associate Fellow at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP). He also holds advisory positions on the boards of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the International Institute for Peace, and the Science Board of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Defence in Vienna.

On secondment from the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Fred served as Senior Advisor to the Secretary General of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Prior to that, he headed the GCSP for seven years. His past appointments also include membership of the United Nations Secretary-General's Disarmament Advisory Board and the Academic Advisory Board of the NATO Defence College (NDC).

Fred holds a PhD and a Master's Degree from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University and a bachelor's degree from the Geneva Graduate Institute.

The views expressed in this report are those of the author(s) alone. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the Toda Peace Institute. An online edition of this and related reports and policy briefs can be downloaded on our website: toda.org/policy-briefs-and-resources.html



Toda Peace Institute
Samon Eleven Bldg. 5F,
3-1 Samon-cho, Shinjuku-ku
Tokyo 160-0017, Japan

Tel. +81-3-3356-5481
Fax. +81-3-3356-5482
Email: contact@toda.org

© 2025 Toda Peace Institute

Abstract

Russia's war against Ukraine has fundamentally altered European security, shifting the focus from co-operative approaches to fragmented, self-interested policies. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), historically central to fostering co-operative security, now faces unprecedented challenges due to geopolitical rivalries and institutional paralysis. This paper examines the evolution of co-operative security, the OSCE's role in arms control, crisis management, and emerging transnational threats such as cyber risks, migration, and climate change. With its consensus-based structure increasingly obstructed, alternative mechanisms—such as coalitions of the willing, structured dialogue, and flexible diplomatic formats—are proposed to sustain co-operative security. The paper concludes by assessing the OSCE's potential role in post-war Ukraine and the broader European security architecture.

Introduction

Russia's war against Ukraine has triggered a paradigm shift in European security, transforming the continent into a complex and challenging security landscape. The resurgence of geopolitical competition, particularly between the United States, China and Russia, has significantly weakened European security, pushing states towards more self-interested and fragmented approaches that often undermine democratic governance and unity. Despite the growing international anarchy, based on the maxim of "might is right", states still seek co-operation to manage uncertainty, share information and stabilise expectations.[1]

Since the Cold War, multilateral security co-operation has been crucial to European stability. The 1975 Helsinki Final Act (HFA) established this political process through the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), emphasising military security, economic co-operation and human rights. This framework eventually led to the creation of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), an inclusive, soft security organisation. Unlike collective security, co-operative security relies on voluntary participation and shared interests, prioritising consultation and compromise over legal obligations.[2]

While the OSCE has played a crucial role in post-Cold War democratic transitions and arms control, growing tensions, particularly over NATO enlargement and Russia's antagonism, have challenged its consensus-based structure. Russia's actions in Crimea and Ukraine have exacerbated these challenges. This study examines the evolution of co-operative security and analyses the OSCE's role in addressing various security challenges, including arms control, crisis management and emerging threats such as cyber risks, migration and climate change. It also examines how geopolitical rivalries have affected the OSCE's effectiveness, ultimately considering the need for more flexible, coalition-based strategies to maintain co-operative security in today's fragmented world.

[1] Robert O. Keohane and Lisa L. Martin, "The Promise of Institutional Theory," *International Security* 20, no. 1 (Summer 1995): 39–51.

[2] Walter Kemp, *Security through Cooperation*, Routledge New Diplomacy Studies, Routledge, 2022.

Co-operative security during the Cold War

During the Cold War, the CSCE provided a multilateral diplomatic framework for East–West dialogue and co-operation in Europe. Its emphasis on principles such as respect for sovereignty and human rights laid the foundation for the OSCE's current role in promoting inclusive and comprehensive security in the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian regions.

The Soviet Union saw the HFA as a diplomatic victory that secured international recognition of its post-World War II borders and sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. Conversely, the West prioritised the inclusion of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the agreement, using the "human dimension basket" to challenge Soviet authoritarianism, support human rights dissidents and promote democratic values in the Eastern bloc. The 1975 HFA formalised co-operation in three "baskets" covering security, economics and human rights. This innovative three-basket approach was based on the principle of interdependence – a diplomatic breakthrough that for the first time explicitly linked common security objectives to human rights protection and economic governance standards. This comprehensive framework allowed for a balance between security interests (favoured by the USSR), economic co-operation (mutually beneficial), and human rights (supported by the West).

This Cold War co-operation during the period of détente led to a number of landmark arms control, confidence-building and transparency agreements... These agreements laid the foundations for an arms control framework in Europe that promoted mutual accountability and enhanced stability.

This Cold War co-operation during the period of détente led to a number of landmark arms control, confidence-building and transparency agreements: The Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) was a cornerstone of post-Cold War security, imposing legally binding limits on key categories of conventional military equipment and establishing a verification regime through on-site inspections. Its strength lay in its ability to create a balanced force structure between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, thereby reducing the risk of surprise attacks and promoting long-term military transparency in Europe. Other agreements that strengthened the arms control regime included the OSCE Vienna Document (1990), which enhanced military transparency and confidence-building measures, and the Open Skies Agreement (1992), which provided an instrument for verifying compliance with the CFE and Vienna Document commitments. In addition, the Dayton Agreement (1995-1996) led to regional post-conflict arms reductions in the Balkans, strengthening stability and co-operative security throughout Europe.

These agreements laid the foundations for an arms control framework in Europe that promoted mutual accountability and enhanced stability. Crucially, they engaged both the United States and the Soviet Union as key actors, ensuring a co-operative security architecture that shaped the post-Cold War security dynamic in Europe.

The OSCE in transition: From post-Cold War optimism to contemporary crisis

The end of the Cold War dramatically reshaped European security, a transformation symbolised by the Charter of Paris for a New Europe, signed on 21 November 1990. On that occasion, the leaders of the CSCE participating States declared the end of the Cold War and committed themselves to a new era of democracy, peace and security in Europe. The reunification of Germany and the resolution of outstanding issues from the Second World War underscored the immense potential for positive change. In this new post-Cold War era, the OSCE played a pivotal role in supporting the transition to democratic governance of former communist states, thus contributing significantly to European stability.[3]

This period also saw the strengthening of OSCE institutions dedicated to conflict prevention, notably by the creation of the Conflict Prevention Center (CPC), the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). The adoption of the 1999 Charter for European Security reinforced commitments to co-operative security, arms control, and confidence-building measures.

During that period, the Conflict Prevention Center (CPC), the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) played a crucial role in advancing conflict prevention, democracy-building, and human rights protection across Europe. The CPC, tasked with early warning, conflict prevention, crisis management, and post-conflict rehabilitation across the OSCE region, actively supported field operations and diplomatic efforts to uphold security and stability. In the 1990s, its work was primarily focused on war termination, peacebuilding, and post-conflict reconstruction in the Western Balkans, addressing the challenges posed by violent conflicts and facilitating long-term regional stability

Concurrently, the HCNM mediated language and citizenship reforms for Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia while helping de-escalate the 2001 Albanian-Macedonian crisis. ODIHR established itself as a guarantor of democratic integrity, monitoring Ukraine's critical 2004 Orange Revolution elections and leading international efforts against human trafficking in Bosnia and Kosovo through policy development and victim protection.

However, NATO's post-Cold War enlargements has had mixed effects. While the new members saw it as essential to their sovereignty and stability, it exacerbated geopolitical tensions with Russia. As NATO's influence grew and further enlargement was debated, these tensions deepened, fuelling Russian suspicion and strategic rivalry. [4]

NATO's 1999 military intervention in Serbia and the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia further eroded the foundations of co-operative security in Europe. The 2010 OSCE Astana Summit exposed these divisions when Russia's proposal for a European Security Treaty, based on the Helsinki principle of indivisible security, received little support from Western countries – highlighting the deepening rift between Russia and the West. [5] The antagonism reached a breaking point with Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, which fractured the OSCE, deepened internal divisions and severely challenged its credibility as a security organisation.

[3] Victor-Yves Ghebali, *The OSCE in Post-Communist Europe: Towards a Pan-European Security Identity 1990–1996*, Brussels: Etablissement Bruylant, 1996, p. 111.

[4] M.E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

[5] The Helsinki principle "indivisibility of security" suggests that the security of one state is inherently linked to the security of others; actions taken to enhance one's own security should not compromise that of another. Russia has invoked this principle in discussions about NATO's eastward expansion, arguing that such enlargement threatens its national security.

Nevertheless, the 2014 Swiss Chairmanship briefly revived the OSCE's relevance by playing a mediating role between Ukraine and Russia, negotiating a peace mission and facilitating the Minsk Agreements, which initially offered hope for a diplomatic solution to the conflict in eastern Ukraine. However, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 plunged the OSCE into a deep crisis and effectively dismantled its fragile co-operative security framework. Russia's veto of the OSCE budget since 2022 has further crippled its operational capacity and deepened its institutional paralysis.

Current crisis and the role of co-operative security

The OSCE's space for co-operation has shrunk as a result of the standoff between Russia and the West. However, following Russia's annexation of Crimea, OSCE countries have continued to take decisions in areas beyond core European security. In response to growing transnational security challenges, the OSCE has engaged in co-operative approaches beyond state-centric risks, such as migration and human trafficking, cyber threats, and climate change, with an emphasis on cross-border co-operation.

The OSCE promotes migration governance by addressing the root causes of displacement, protecting the rights of migrants and promoting international co-operation for safe, orderly and humane migration.[6] Recognising trafficking in human beings as a serious human rights violation and security threat, the OSCE, through its Action Plan and Special Representative, assists States in strengthening legislation, improving law enforcement and combating technology-facilitated trafficking.

Trafficking in Human Beings (THB) threatens co-operative security, requiring sustained cross-border collaboration along migration routes. Eastern and Southeastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Caucasus are key source and transit regions, while Western Europe, North America, and the Mediterranean are major destination areas. In response to the war in Ukraine, the OSCE has taken steps to reduce the risk of trafficking for Ukrainian refugees, including awareness-raising campaigns, monitoring of reception centres and support for secure registration systems.[7]

To combat THB, the OSCE partners with UNODC and IOM to strengthen legal frameworks and victim assistance, the EU to align security policies and fund anti-trafficking programs, and the Council of Europe (GRETA) to ensure rigorous monitoring. Interpol and Europol bolster cross-border investigations, creating a coordinated network to disrupt trafficking operations and protect vulnerable individuals.[8]

Beyond migration, the OSCE has established 16 Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) between 2013 and 2016 to strengthen cybersecurity co-operation among its participating States.[9] These activities led to the establishment of national cyber security focal points and their integration into the OSCE communication network. They also facilitated the exchange of cyber policies and enhanced co-operation in preventing and responding to cyber incidents. Ultimately, these efforts aimed to increase transparency, predictability and trust in cyberspace among OSCE participating States.[10]

[6] OSCE's Role in the Governance of Large Movements of Migrants and Refugees, MC Decision No. 3/16 (2016).

[7] 2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Ukraine by the Office to Monitor and Combat trafficking in Persons, US Department of State. 2023.

[8] GRETA stands for Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings.

[9] CBMs are the umbrella term for any measure that builds confidence. CSBMs are a specific type of CBM that focuses on military security.

[10] OSCE PC Decision No. 1106 (2013).

Despite the continued deterioration of relations within the OSCE, it achieved a consensus decision in 2021 on addressing climate-related security risks and promoting co-operation among participating States. Efforts focused on strengthening policy frameworks, facilitating regional dialogue, enhancing climate adaptation, promoting environmental diplomacy, and fostering public-private partnerships. These initiatives aimed to reduce climate-related risks, enhance resilience and reduce the propensity for conflict, with a particular focus on Central Asia, a region particularly vulnerable to the effects of global warming.[11]

Soft security and co-operative arms control

Soft security co-operation emphasises transparency and openness through politically binding but not legally enforceable agreements. This approach offers flexibility and promotes constructive dialogue and mutual trust without the rigidity of legal obligations. The OSCE has played a crucial role in promoting co-operative security, particularly through its work on confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs) and the prevention of military incidents.[12]

While the CFE and Open Skies treaties have eroded, the Vienna Document remains a key CSBM framework. It commits participating States to an annual exchange of military information, prior notification of major military exercises, on-site inspections and verification to ensure compliance, and risk reduction mechanisms allowing for clarification of unusual military activities. Together with transparency measures such as the Global Exchange of Military Information (GEMI), it aims to build trust and transparency among participating states, although current geopolitical tensions are affecting its full effectiveness.

Beyond the Vienna Document, the OSCE has broadened its arms control efforts to include the framework for Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW). Under this framework, the OSCE addresses the illicit proliferation of SALW and supports the safe management of explosive remnants of war (ERW), particularly in the Western Balkans. In this area, the OSCE also co-operates with platforms and regional initiatives, such as the South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC), to strengthen arms control and security measures. The joint Capacity Development Programme for Conventional Ammunition Stockpile Management (CASM) in Serbia, for example, was implemented by SEESAC under the joint auspices of UNDP and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC).[13] This collaboration aimed to enhance the security and safety of ammunition storage sites and dispose of surplus ammunition.[14]

OSCE efforts to counter the proliferation of SALW complement UN initiatives such as the Programme of Action, which focuses on regional co-operation and practical measures to reduce the availability of these weapons. Co-operative security is further strengthened through the implementation of the Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security (1994). This political agreement outlines key principles, including democratic control of armed forces, transparency in defence policies and military spending, and robust civil–military relations aimed at preventing military interference in politics. Finally, the OSCE contributes to non-proliferation efforts through initiatives such as those in support of UN Security Council Resolution 1540.[15]

[11] Strengthening Co-operation to Address the Challenges Caused by Climate Change, MC Decision No. 3/21 (2021).

[12] Gabriela Iveliz Rosa Hernández, “Whither Conventional Arms Control in Europe?,” in OSCE Insights, eds. Cornelius Friesendorf and Argyro Kartsonaki (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2024).

[13] Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), is an intergovernmental organisation that promotes regional co-operation and European integration among the countries of Southeast Europe, particularly the Western Balkans.

[14] <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-serbia/arms-control>

[15] UNSC Resolution 1540 (2004) obliges all states to refrain from providing any form of support to non-state actors attempting to acquire nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons and their means of delivery.

The way forward: Flexilateralism and coalitions of the willing

As the OSCE struggles with internal paralysis and mounting geopolitical pressures, it is essential to adapt to new forms of multilateral co-operation. A pragmatic approach based on flexilateralism and coalitions of the willing offers a possible way to preserve the core functions of the OSCE and avoid deadlock. By fostering new, more flexible and dynamic forms of co-operation among like-minded states, the OSCE can maintain its relevance despite the growing structural and political constraints associated with the consensus rule.

STRUCTURED DIALOGUE

As geopolitical tensions persist, strengthening dialogue platforms is essential to prevent further escalation. Despite the current stalemate caused by the war in Ukraine, the OSCE must continue to use its expertise in conflict prevention and mediation. The Structured Dialogue, established in 2016, remains the only potential pan-European platform to foster discussions on transparency, risk reduction, prevention of military incidents and confidence-building despite international tensions. Given the challenges posed by the denial of consensus, alternative approaches must be considered. One promising strategy is to lay the groundwork for dialogue in smaller formats, such as “Friends of” groups or coalitions of the willing composed of like-minded states. These flexible formats make it possible to establish a track record of European security initiatives without being hampered by the political gridlock that has frequently paralyzed the OSCE’s broader decision-making processes. Groups of Friends have been established within the OSCE to promote a specific issue-areas, such as mediation, security sector governance, Ukraine, and the safety of journalists. More inclusive and formally established within the OSCE are the Open-ended Working Groups (OEWGs), such as the OEWG on the Conflict Cycle.

CO-OPERATIVE GLOBAL–REGIONAL FRAMEWORK

The OSCE, operating under Chapter VIII of the UN Charter, can offer a bridge between global security commitments and their practical implementation at the regional level. As a regional organisation focused on conflict prevention, crisis management, and post-conflict rehabilitation, the OSCE directly complements and reinforces the UN's broader peace and security agenda. Global arrangements, such as the Pact for the Future (2024) and the New Agenda for Peace (2023), establish overarching, globally agreed guidelines and commitments. Regional actors like the OSCE can play a role in translating such global engagements into concrete action tailored to specific contexts. Drawing from the Pact for the Future, to bolster security, the OSCE should prioritize early conflict prevention and arms control by enhancing diplomatic engagement, compliance monitoring, and risk assessment, while simultaneously modernizing field missions and crisis response through improved regional coordination. This should be coupled with ensuring women's participation in peace processes, integrating climate security risks, promoting national violence prevention strategies, and reinforcing multilateral governance to restore trust in international institutions.

MOSCOW MECHANISM

The OSCE's Moscow Mechanism is an example of "flexilateralism" in action, providing an important tool for addressing human rights violations within OSCE participating States. It allows them to bypass the traditional consensus requirement and send independent experts to investigate alleged violations, even without the consent of the target state. This mechanism promotes accountability and transparency, which are essential for the protection of human rights and the compliance with OSCE principles and commitments. The Moscow Mechanism has been used 15 times since its inception (1990), including three times since 2022, specifically in response to human rights violations, war crimes and related concerns arising from the conflict in Ukraine. Examples include the arbitrary deprivation of liberty of Ukrainian civilians by the Russian Federation or attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, manifested in indiscriminate shelling of civilian buildings, targeted killings and sieges that deny basic necessities.[16] The expert reports are then shared with international organisations such as the UN and the Council of Europe, thereby supporting broader multilateral efforts to enforce international law and human rights standards.[17]

SUPPORT PROGRAMME IN UKRAINE

Recognising the limitations of its consensus-based structure, the OSCE has established the Support Programme for Ukraine (SPU) as a mechanism for action outside traditional parameters, based on extra-budgetary financing. This programme, consisting of 30 different projects, focuses on laying the groundwork for Ukraine's eventual reconstruction and demonstrates the OSCE's attempt to assisting Ukraine even in the midst of the OSCE's internal political divisions. Under the leadership of a Special Representative, the SPU prioritises the protection of civilians through mine action, assistance to victims of gender-based violence and addressing the environmental consequences of the war, and provides medium- to long-term assistance to both the public and private sectors in Ukraine. The OSCE's continued presence and networking with government institutions and NGOs in Ukraine is essential. In the event of a ceasefire or peace agreement, this presence would serve as a valuable foundation for the OSCE to contribute to operational support and the establishment of a new phase of co-operative security.

Conclusions

The resurgence of geopolitical rivalry has severely undermined co-operative security in Europe, hampering the OSCE's traditional role in promoting dialogue and stability. While the OSCE has a strong track record in arms control and CSBMs and continues to address a wide range of security challenges—including those related to migration, climate change and cyber threats—its consensus-based decision-making process has increasingly become a significant obstacle. This is particularly evident in the context of the war in Ukraine, where the need for consensus has often led to institutional paralysis and an inability to find compromise solutions.

To break this impasse and revitalize co-operative security, a more pragmatic and flexible approach is essential. This could involve leveraging "coalitions of the willing" on specific issues, building upon existing mechanisms like the Moscow Mechanism, drawing guidance from global agreements, and exploring alternative diplomatic formats to circumvent the constraints of formal procedures.

Given its extensive conflict resolution toolkit, the OSCE could play a useful role in supporting a peace process in Ukraine by providing an inclusive platform for reaffirming OSCE principles and commitments and contributing to the shaping of a new European security architecture through its Structured Dialogue. As a neutral organisation, the OSCE's potential operational support spans key areas, from ceasefire monitoring and humanitarian demining to the collection, management, and destruction of SALW, and mine action, including clearing explosive remnants of war (ERW), all contributing to post-conflict stability and security.

The OSCE's effectiveness in this complex environment depends on identifying and exploiting areas of common interest suitable to compromise while managing deep political divisions. This requires forging stronger partnerships with organisations such as the UN and the EU, and developing innovative, pragmatic approaches to conflict prevention that reflect today's fragmented security landscape.

The future relevance of the OSCE depends on a renewed political commitment to its core norms, principles and commitments by all participating States. Real political will and if necessary political lobbying by the capitals is needed to achieve this. The 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act could hopefully advance this objective.

[16] Moscow Mechanism experts report to OSCE Permanent Council on Ukraine, 13 April 2022.

<https://www.osce.org/permanent-council/515874>

[17] Wolfgang Benedek, "The Moscow Mechanism of the OSCE: Rules, Practice, and Possible Improvements," in OSCE Insights, eds. Cornelius Friesendorf and Argyro Kartsonaki (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2025)



THE TODA PEACE INSTITUTE

The Toda Peace Institute is an independent, nonpartisan institute committed to advancing a more just and peaceful world through policy-oriented peace research and practice. The Institute commissions evidence-based research, convenes multi-track and multi-disciplinary problem-solving workshops and seminars, and promotes dialogue across ethnic, cultural, religious and political divides. It catalyses practical, policy-oriented conversations between theoretical experts, practitioners, policymakers and civil society leaders in order to discern innovative and creative solutions to the major problems confronting the world in the twenty-first century (see www.toda.org for more information).

CONTACT US

Toda Peace Institute

Samon Eleven Bldg. 5 th Floor
3-1 Samon-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 160-0017, Japan

Email

contact@toda.org

Sign up for the Toda Peace Institute mailing list

<https://toda.org/policy-briefs-and-resources/email-newsletter.html>

Connect with us on the following media.

YouTube: [@todapeaceinstitute3917](https://www.youtube.com/@todapeaceinstitute3917)

X (Twitter): <https://twitter.com/TodaInstitute>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/TodaInstitute>