



STRENGTHENING THE OSCE'S CLIMATE SECURITY AGENDA

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INTRODUCTION

Given its mandate on comprehensive security, it is not surprising that the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) was among the first international organizations to feature climate change and security concerns as part of its work. Of the three dimensions of security—politico-military, economic-environmental and human—the work of the OSCE on climate change and security is mostly situated in the second. It has been integrating climate and wider environmental concerns since its establishment in 1975 by the Helsinki Final Act. The initial focus was on issues such as resource management and pollution. Key developments since have included the creation of a Coordinator of Economic and Environmental Activities in 1997 and the 2007 Madrid Declaration, which explicitly recognizes the challenges of climate change.¹ Following various projects and discussions on climate-related risks, the December 2021 Stockholm Ministerial Council Decision marked a significant leap forward. It is the first OSCE decision solely focused on strengthening cooperation to address the challenges of climate change and explicitly acknowledges the potential impact of climate change on prosperity, stability and security.² The OSCE recognized ‘that the effects of climate change can exacerbate economic challenges and environmental degradation, which may negatively affect prosperity, stability and security in the OSCE area’.³

The decision gives the organization a clear mandate to work at the intersection between climate change and security. The decision and topic provide opportunities for joint planning and programming between the secretariat and field offices. However, implementation of the climate change and security agenda in the OSCE is yet to reach its full potential. To advance this valuable work, this policy brief has been financed by Finland to inform and advance the climate and security agenda as a part of the Finnish Chairpersonship of the OSCE in 2025. The scope of this paper is limited to the OSCE's work on climate change and security, drawing a distinction between its wider environmental work and its environmental security work within

SUMMARY

● Despite a clear mandate from the December 2021 Stockholm Ministerial Council Decision on Strengthening Co-operation to Address the Challenges Caused by Climate Change, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) approach is yet to reach its full potential. An analysis of the current strategy shows that while the OSCE has strengths, such as a comprehensive security mandate and a grass-roots presence through its field operations, its effectiveness is undermined by weaknesses, such as geopolitical distractions, a tendency to focus on general environmental work rather than security and poor integration between headquarters and field missions. To strengthen its work, the OSCE should frame climate change as a cross-dimensional security risk, create an annual integrated climate and environmental security assessment and improve internal cooperation. These actions would better prepare the organization for a changing security landscape.

¹ Hakala, E., ‘Environmental security for the promotion of pan-European Integration: The OSCE as a “Europeanising actor” in the Balkans’, eds M. Broad and S. Kansikas, *European Integration Beyond Brussels: Unity in East and West Europe Since 1945* (Springer International Publishing, 2020).

² Barnhoorn, A., ‘Taking climate security forward in the OSCE’, 15 June 2022; Barnhoorn, A., *Comparing Responses to Climate-Related Security Risks Among the EU, NATO and the OSCE* (SIPRI: Stockholm, 2023); and Bremberg, N., ‘The OSCE and climate security: Diplomatic practice in a changing geopolitical context’, *International Affairs*, vol. 99, no. 3 (2023), pp. 1149–65.

³ OSCE, Ministerial Decision no. 3/21, ‘Strengthening co-operation to address the challenges caused by climate change’, 3 Dec. 2021.

the Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities (OCEEA). The paper is not an evaluation of the OSCE's climate security projects. It analyses the key strengths and weaknesses of the organization's current approach. Based on this analysis, it outlines five areas that provide concrete entry points to strengthen the OSCE's work and prepare the organization for a drastically changing security landscape.

CURRENT APPROACH AND POLICY GAPS

Climate-related security risks are the adverse effects of climate change on social systems at different levels, including human, community, state and international security, that can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and contribute to instability and conflict. These risks manifest themselves differently in the OSCE region than in regions with higher vulnerability and lower adaptive capacity such as parts of Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. This explains the organization's more preventative approach focused on cooperation and dialogue. The organization's long-standing work on climate-related security risks gained new momentum in 2021 following the Stockholm Ministerial Decision, which sought to legitimize the climate change and security agenda in the OSCE and to guide action. Implementation has primarily occurred through extra-budgetary projects, a notable example being the flagship initiative 'Strengthening Responses to Security Risks from Climate Change in South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia', which was implemented together with the German think tank adelphi. This aims to reduce such risks by raising awareness, building capacity and implementing adaptation measures. Alongside a newly established Climate and Security Fund repository programme, high-level dialogues and an increased focus within the Economic and Environmental Forum, this is the core of the OSCE's current approach.

At the same time, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 prompted a major OSCE-led effort to assess the environmental damage, building on prior engagement following Russia's annexation of Crimea and the Donbas region in 2014. While this complex task is distinct from the work on climate change and security, it highlights the organization's potential role in responding to environmental crises. This assessment work faces considerable obstacles due to the ongoing conflict and the political sensitivities surrounding the data and its publication.

Against this backdrop, the question arises how to advance and further strengthen the OSCE's engagement on climate change and security. Based on background research and interviews with participating states, OSCE staff members and other experts, our analysis shows that the OSCE's key strengths, such as its comprehensive security lens, clear mandate, grassroots presence and committed donors, are challenged by weaknesses—notably, geopolitical tensions, the lack of a security focus, difficulties with mainstreaming climate into the work of the organization and the absence of a comprehensive risk assessment.



Strengths

Comprehensive security lens

The OSCE's comprehensive definition of security is extremely useful for its climate security-related activities. The OSCE's approach to security encompasses the organization's three security dimensions—politico-military, economic-environmental and human. This is a unique strength as it recognizes that security goes beyond military issues to include human rights, democracy, economic and environmental issues and political aspects. This approach, which is particularly emphasized by the secretariat, integrates conflict cycle thinking, whereby the OSCE contributes to early warning, conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation.⁴ The comprehensive perspective fits well with climate security, which also comprises military, human and socio-economic aspects and stretches across all stages of the conflict cycle.

Although the climate security agenda is primarily located within the second dimension, it should be recognized as a cross-dimensional topic with links to the first dimension (conflict prevention and security sector governance) and the third dimension (the role of journalists, civil society and gender). It is notable that in some of its ongoing work, the OSCE aims to use climate change as an entry point for fostering regional cooperation, dialogue, confidence-building and prevention.⁵ In addition, its unique geographic coverage and status as a regional and security organization allow it to address the transboundary impacts of climate change.

Mandate through ministerial decision

The 2021 Stockholm Ministerial Council Decision on Strengthening Co-operation to Address the Challenges Caused by Climate Change is a crucial enabler that puts climate change and security subtly but firmly on the OSCE agenda. Formally, it primarily encourages action by the participating states and tasks OSCE executive structures with a specific and circumscribed support role, to act only at the request of those states and within existing resources.

Nonetheless, the experts and policy actors interviewed highlighted the political impact of the decision, which provides an explicit mandate to work on climate change and security issues. Thus, while formally reactive, its existence has empowered OSCE bodies to more confidently develop climate-related security programming and encouraged participating states to request support.

The decision provides legitimacy and room for manoeuvre for the secretariat and participating states to act. It is notable that three consecutive Chairs—North Macedonia, Malta and Finland—have prioritized the topic of climate change and security and introduced a Special Representative on Climate Change (North Macedonia and Malta) or Climate and Security (Finland). Supported by a wider group of participating states and coupled with strong institutional leadership by Secretary General Helga Schmidt,

⁴ Wohlfeld, M. and Tanner, F., 'Comprehensive security and new challenges: Strengthening the OSCE', Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), 28 May 2021.

⁵ Mosello, B. et al., *Regional Co-Operation Strategy on Climate Change and Security in Central Asia's High Mountain Areas* (adelphi, Berlin and OSCE, Vienna, 2024).

this led to the 2023 High-Level Conference on Climate Change, which many see as an important milestone in mobilizing support and outlining a vision for the OSCE on climate security. This has most recently been followed up with Finland's Chairpersonship Conference on Climate and Security in June 2025.

The interviewees suggest that the existing Stockholm Decision is sufficient and a new or updated one would be difficult to achieve in the current political climate. Instead, the focus should be on implementation of and commitment to the language agreed in the decision.

Grassroots presence through field operations

One advantage of the OSCE approach is its ability to engage the local level in environmental activities through its field operations, which support implementation of OSCE commitments and build capacities on the ground. Currently active in 12 states, each field operation has an individual mandate agreed with the host country, although not all mandates include the second dimension. These local contacts and networks are crucial for involving a wide range of actors from policymakers to civil society and provide opportunities to link climate change with topics such as gender, peace and security. Using direct links in the field, it has been possible to increase the relevance and impact of organization-wide flagship projects on climate security implemented by the secretariat at the local level. For instance, local contacts have considerably facilitated organization of the regional workshops that have been pivotal to driving the OSCE's work on wildfire management in south-eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

Field operations also carry out their own projects and activities on various themes as determined by their mandates, which gives them an opportunity to promote climate security on the ground. Environmental issues feature among the topics of these projects. The presence in Albania has implemented an extra-budgetary project, 'Enhance environmental governance and security in Albania', while the missions in Montenegro and Serbia have supported national agencies tackling environmental crime. The operations in Central Asia have organized seminars or other one-off events on topics such as waste management, climate data availability, disaster risk reduction and water management.

Committed donors

Much of the work on climate change and security is carried out in extra-budgetary projects, such as the flagship climate and security project. What would generally be a weakness, however, reflects a strength that indicates wide recognition and support. Projects are being funded by a significant number of donors. For example, 17 donors funded the flagship project. Key donors include Austria, Finland, Germany, Poland, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States. In addition, a new OSCE Climate and Security Fund repository programme was established in 2023, initiated with German support, to scale-up climate activities. The fund is structured to allow less financially strong countries to contribute to projects. While this broad donor support is a significant asset, however, the OSCE's efforts are hampered by various internal and external challenges that limit its overall effectiveness.



Weaknesses

Geopolitical tensions

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine halted the broader work of the organization, including on climate and security, and shifted the immediate focus. The Polish Chairpersonship made Ukraine a priority soon after the Stockholm decision was taken. Advances in areas such as climate security became more difficult because of political obstacles, particularly from Russia. Russian opposition is likely to grow, given the OSCE's emerging focus on environmental assessments of the impact of the war in Ukraine. Despite the devastating human and environmental impacts, the OSCE and its partners face difficulties in publishing their findings due to the political sensitivities of several states and the need for consensus.

The geopolitical situation has deteriorated further following the change of administration in the USA and the rearmament drive in Europe. The consequences are a deficit of trust in and among international alliances and increased mistrust in the multilateral system, as well as drastic reductions in funding for many organizations. While this has not fully erased climate change from the security agenda in the OSCE and other organizations, its urgency has been largely overshadowed by the military security concerns of participating states.

A comparison of the positioning of OSCE participating states on climate change and security with their statements at the 2024 Ministerial Council meeting shows how the war in Ukraine is overshadowing other topics. Even countries that are generally considered to be leading on the climate change and security agenda, and promoting and supporting the issue through extrabudgetary funding were less likely to promote the topic in the Ministerial Council. Only Kazakhstan emerged stronger than an analysis of their previous positioning would suggest. This does not necessarily reflect a reduced commitment to the topic by these states. However, it demonstrates the difficulties states face—especially some European states, which tend to be its strongest supporters—in pushing the climate security agenda at the highest level, given the current geopolitical tensions.

Lack of security focus

A critical pitfall of the policy work around climate security is that it focuses too much on climate change and neglects the security dimension. This is an important consideration. Institutional 'homes' exist within the organization and others for both climate change and security but the *intersection* of the two issues tends to fall between the cracks. Cooperation and dialogue initiatives are often not directly linked to security, even though, as the decision recognizes, 'the effects of climate change can exacerbate economic challenges and environmental degradation, which may negatively affect prosperity, stability and security in the OSCE area'. An approach has developed organically over time within the OCEEA but the ministerial council decision does not define a common approach with regard to security.

As such, much of what the OSCE does is perceived by the participating state representatives and experts interviewed as general climate change work rather than distinct work on climate change *and* security. Several interviewees pointed out that the organization must be mindful of sticking to its

security mandate and focusing on its added value, such as early warning and conflict expertise, rather than becoming too involved in development or in climate adaptation- and mitigation-related activities. Some also questioned whether there is adequate conceptual perspective and analysis within the organization to elucidate what climate security is and the types of risks that it covers. In addition, according to some interviewees, the framing of activities as ‘climate security’ might sometimes be a strategic choice to gain momentum or funding when the work is more broadly environmental.

Paradoxically, the situation is often also due to the way participating states frame the projects they support and finance. Strictly security-centred work may often be deemed too prone to disputes to actually implement in practice. This balancing act between highly politicized work on contested topics and the need to find common ground for cooperation is commonly recognized in environmental security.⁶ The OSCE has also been innovative at toeing the line between the two.

A further complication for the secretariat is that participating states differ in how they perceive climate change and security. Countries such as Russia and Türkiye as well as Central Asian states and those in the South Caucasus are often careful to restrict their definitions to the second dimension. This hinders horizontal integration within the secretariat and can lead to political tiptoeing in an attempt to maintain consensus. Some officials view this careful navigation not as a weakness, but as a necessary balancing act to promote the climate security agenda. Nonetheless, it can amplify the perception of too much focus on climate change rather than security.

Difficult horizontal and vertical integration of the agenda

Like many other larger organizations, the OSCE faces difficulties with horizontal integration—within OSCE headquarters between different dimensions, especially the first and second dimension—and with vertical integration between headquarters and the field. Vertical integration is a weakness that is also seen in other organizations, notably the UN, and creates a particular challenge. The interviews highlighted the fact that there is a perception that the OSCE headquarters in Vienna is in its ‘own bubble’, which creates challenges for cross-departmental cooperation and communication with field missions. The problem is certainly not in Vienna alone, as field missions can be conservative and are not always receptive to new ideas from the centre, and they sometimes feel inadequately engaged with or understood by headquarters. While there has been training on climate security for field operations staff, interviewees indicated problems with consistent follow-up and practical implementation in the field.

There is also an issue with integrating and mainstreaming the topic across headquarters. For instance, integrating climate considerations into the work of the Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC) is still at an early stage. Further opportunities for horizontal integration are emerging from the OSCE’s autonomous institutions—the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the Representative on Freedom of the Media, and the High Commissioner on National Minorities. These bodies are beginning to address climate-related topics from within their mandates.

⁶ Ide, T., ‘The dark side of environmental peacebuilding’, *World Development*, vol. 127, (Mar. 2020).



ADVANCING CLIMATE CHANGE AND SECURITY AT THE OSCE

The OSCE's comparative advantage stems from its comprehensive security concept, extensive field presence in local and transboundary dialogues and core mandate for conflict prevention, all within the world's largest regional security framework. Nonetheless, the weaknesses identified above represent obstacles to achieving the OSCE's climate change and security agenda. The OSCE's climate security efforts are hampered by significant impediments, not least the overarching geopolitical tensions triggered by the war in Ukraine which has diverted focus and increased political blockages. Consensus-based decision making and reliance on extra-budgetary funding further constrain progress and long-term strategic planning. While there is an understanding that the existing Stockholm decision provides a good framework, which makes a new overarching decision politically unnecessary, the full operationalization of a comprehensive, integrated OSCE-wide climate change *and* security strategy, especially one deeply embedded in field operations, remains an unfulfilled aspiration. The organization's potential lies in its comprehensive security concept and regional presence but its limitations are starkly defined by the difficult political space it navigates and by resource constraints. To overcome these challenges and to capitalize on the OSCE's unique strengths, we recommend targeted action in five key areas for the Finnish and future chairpersonships.

Framing that brings security more into the focus

To shift the perception from too climate change focused to climate change and security concerns, the OSCE and its participating states should consistently and explicitly articulate the pathways through which climate change impacts human, regional and national security. Its sub-regional risk assessments show how climate-related security risks exacerbate and compound existing socio-economic vulnerabilities, resource scarcities and demographic pressures, potentially leading to instability or conflict. These assessments require funding to enable them to be continuously updated. They would also benefit from a strengthened methodology and a focus on how climate-related impacts affect prosperity, stability and security.

The OSCE's comprehensive security lens is therefore a blessing and a curse. The OSCE and participating states should leverage specific aspects by framing climate action as integral to all three dimensions: politico-military security (border stability and resource conflict prevention), economic-environmental security (resilient infrastructure and energy security) and human security (displacement and impacts on livelihoods).

The OSCE should ensure that all climate-related projects and interventions— even those with significant environmental components—continue to define and further strengthen its reports on the wider impacts and intended security co-benefits, such as fostering transboundary dialogue, building trust between communities or states, or preventing local resource disputes. To this end, Finland as current Chairperson-in-Office should champion this security-focused framing consistently in high-level statements and discussions, reinforcing the message that addressing climate change is core to the OSCE's security mandate.

An annual systematic and integrated climate and environmental security assessment

One way to achieve more consistent framing and structure would be by instigating a process to produce a regular (annual) integrated climate and environmental security assessment for the OSCE region. This would address the current gap in comprehensive, organization-wide analysis. While risk assessments and hotspot mapping are carried out, which provide input for projects, a comprehensive climate and environmental security assessment would be a collaborative effort within the OSCE, drawing on qualitative and quantitative data from OSCE field missions, participating states, the OCEEA projects (including existing risk assessments and hotspot mapping), the CPC and relevant external partners to provide a holistic view of current and emerging risks. The assessment could be produced by the OCEEA, in close collaboration with the field operations and the CPC, and would ideally engage with a large part of the organization. The methodology should be innovative, utilizing but going beyond standard risk mapping to provide actionable, forward-looking analyses that identify specific transboundary vulnerabilities, potential flashpoints and opportunities for preventive action and regional cooperation. The Climate Conflict Vulnerability Index (CCVI) developed by the University of the Bundeswehr Munich and the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research with the German Federal Foreign Office is one cutting edge tool that could inform these assessments. The findings of these regular assessments should be presented to relevant OSCE bodies, including the Permanent Council, to inform policy discussions, guide programmatic priorities and ensure that interventions are targeted and evidence based. This would ensure that the assessments have a clear purpose and lead to follow-up actions. Participating states should aim to provide the necessary funding for such a regular assessment, ideally as part of the unified budget.

Strengthened vertical and horizontal integration and cooperation on climate security

The OSCE secretariat is not currently achieving its full potential either at headquarters or in the field. The OSCE staff needs to strengthen its institutional links. To achieve this, participating states will need to provide clear mandates for collaboration between the OCEEA, the CPC and other relevant structures. A regular OSCE Climate and Environmental Security Assessment would be one way to increase institutional cross-dimensional mainstreaming and integration to ensure climate security considerations are integrated into early warning, conflict analysis, mediation support and field reporting.

To systematically integrate climate security into the mandates and operational planning of OSCE field missions, the OSCE should learn from UN engagement with special political missions as a comparable type of mission set-up. It will be critical to provide missions with clear guidance, training (with robust follow-up mechanisms that go beyond one-off activities) and the necessary resources to identify and respond to climate-related security risks in the respective regions.



Participating states should provide targeted funding to establish regular platforms for knowledge exchange and lesson-sharing on climate security between OSCE headquarters and field operations, as well as among the field missions themselves, to foster a unified approach and build on practical experience. Again, several best practices in the UN context, such as the UN Strategic Dialogue on Climate, Peace and Security in Stockholm, might offer valuable lessons for OSCE internal knowledge exchange and lesson-sharing that go beyond activities more oriented towards global engagement.⁷

Beyond strengthening collaboration between the OCEEA and the CPC, further potential for mainstreaming lies with the OSCE's autonomous institutions. For example, the Representative on Freedom of the Media has produced valuable work on environmental journalism that, if integrated into the broader climate security/climate justice agenda, could enhance public awareness and accountability—key components of early warning and prevention.

Sustained funding commitments and effectiveness

Politically, as noted above, the immediate priority is not to seek a new Ministerial Council decision, as the 2021 Stockholm decision is considered sufficient and the current political space is too constrained to make a new decision possible. Instead, participating states and the secretariat should focus on robustly operationalizing existing commitments. Practically, this means developing and implementing ongoing targeted extra-budgetary projects that demonstrate clear added value in the climate security sphere and address specific regional needs, such as those in south-east Europe and Central Asia. To increase effectiveness, the project portfolio should be streamlined by consolidating and synthesizing related initiatives, aiming for depth and tangible impact rather than broad coverage.

The OSCE Climate and Security Fund repository programme is an obvious tool to utilize here. The fund should be scaled-up to diversify the range of donors. This would allow the secretariat greater agency in identifying and showcasing impactful projects that are aligned with the OSCE's niche and provide the flexibility required to address key needs, rather than allow donors to cherry pick the most attractive projects and locations.

At the same time, to reduce reliance on volatile extra-budgetary sources and ensure continuity, participating states need to continue to advocate persistently for the inclusion of dedicated climate security personnel and programmatic funds in the OSCE's unified budget.

The OSCE cannot and should not do it all. The OSCE should proactively engage and enhance cooperation with international and regional organizations working on climate security, notably UN agencies and the European Union, to leverage comparative advantages, share data and analyses, avoid duplication and ensure a more synergistic international effort. This should be seen as an opportunity for Chairpersonships to highlight climate security, as in the current case of Finland. Many of the themes and the lessons learned during a Chairpersonship can be pursued further in other

⁷ Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA), UN Climate Security Mechanism and SIPRI, Practical note, *Catalysing Action on Climate, Peace and Security: Insights from the UN Strategic Dialogue on Climate, Peace and Security in Stockholm 4–5 May 2024* (Stockholm: FBA, 2024).

multilateral forums, such as the rotating membership of the UN Security Council.

The OSCE's comparative advantage lies in its role as the largest regional security organization and its comprehensive security concept, its extensive field presence that provides direct access to local stakeholders and administrations, its ability to facilitate transboundary dialogue and cooperation in politically sensitive regions and its conflict prevention mandate. These aspects should be central to its fundraising.

Ukraine-specific recommendations

While these recommendations apply across the OSCE's operational area, the unique and overwhelming context of the war in Ukraine demands specific consideration. For the OSCE, Ukraine will remain the elephant in the room for some time. The current division of work within the OSCE, where climate security and environmental damage assessments of conflicts are handled separately within OCEEA, allows the OSCE and participating states to draw a sharp distinction between climate security work and environmental damage assessments. This distinction should be maintained and further stressed.

Direct climate security impacts linked to climate change as a driver of conflict are not currently a key issue in Ukraine. This is distinct from addressing immediate conflict-induced environmental damage. However, the OSCE's broader environmental security expertise and its methodologies for data collection, impact assessment and multi-stakeholder coordination are highly relevant. The OSCE should continue its meticulous work on assessing the environmental damage caused by the war, including its impact on greenhouse gas emissions and the broader climate agenda. This data will be crucial for accountability and recovery planning. The OSCE should support Ukraine to integrate these findings into its national recovery and reconstruction strategies, promoting a 'green recovery' that also takes account of long-term climate resilience. This should include building national capacity for ongoing monitoring and environmental governance.

At the same time, the climate security work of the OSCE should continue beyond specific environmental damage assessments to generate important lessons and best practices from other regions that could also contribute to Ukraine's recovery in the long run.



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