European Security in Flux: The OSCE's First Dimension from Détente to Disruption (1975–2025)

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Abstract

The article looks at the history and enduring relevance of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)'s First Dimension, which covers politico-military issues. Tracing the evolution from the Cold War period to the current rupture, it argues that while cooperative security has yielded to deterrence, the Helsinki Final Act's normative infrastructure remains essential for managing risk and preventing escalation. The analysis advocates a pragmatic shift toward basic risk reduction, leveraging the OSCE's "soft" assets and adapting existing instruments—such as the Vienna Document—to address emerging technologies for example armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). Ultimately, preserving the OSCE acquis provides vital tools for navigating confrontation while safeguarding the foundations for future stability.

Introduction

As the Helsinki Final Act (HFA) approached its 50th anniversary in 2025, the contrast between its foundational promise of cooperative security and the current geopolitical reality could not be starker. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 represents more than a violation of international norms. It has shattered the very premises and the legacy of cooperative security built over five decades. This article directly interrogates that dilemma by tracing the evolution of the OSCE's First Dimension (the politico-military dimension) across six distinct historical phases, moving from the origins of Cold War détente to the current era of systemic rupture.

The analysis begins with the détente phase of the Cold War (1975–1990), a period defined by the Helsinki Final Act and the Stockholm (1986) and Vienna (1990) Documents, where foundational Confidence and Security-Building Measures (CSBMs) proved resilient enough to endure superpower antagonism and lay the groundwork for a more robust regime.

It then flows into the pivotal post-Cold War transformation phase (1990–1995), an era defined by the "Europe whole and free" maxim, the Charter of Paris, the establishment of the Forum for Security Co-operation (FSC), and the birth of a comprehensive arms control architecture, including the adaptation of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). The subsequent consolidation phase (1996–2001) marks the peak of the cooperative model, culminating in the Istanbul Summit (1999) and efforts to modernise the acquis, even as the first geopolitical strains, such as the NATO enlargement and the Kosovo intervention, began to test the consensus principle.

The narrative arc turns downward in the 2000s, a period of renewed contestation where fault lines deepened over NATO enlargement and the erosion of arms control commitments. This slow decay was violently accelerated by the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and cemented by the paradigm shift of 2022. The current reality is a suspension of core 1st dimension instruments and the paralysis of the OSCE consensus model.

Despite this bleak trajectory, this article argues that institutional breakdown does not equate to normative obsolescence. In a deterrence-dominated environment characterised by high military risk and zero trust, the HFA's core logic of managing risk through transparency, predictability, and restraint becomes more essential, not less. While a return to cooperative politics is currently very unlikely, the Helsinki principles endure as a necessary common vocabulary for preventing uncontrolled escalation in an era of confrontation. Moreover, the OSCE must quietly prepare the ground for a future reset—whether through potential roles in a peace settlement in Ukraine or by addressing technological threats that the war has accelerated. The proliferation of UAVs, in particular, amplifies risks of hybrid warfare and civilian harm.

Cold War Context: Defence and Détente

As the Helsinki Final Act reached its 50th anniversary in 2025, Europe faced a security landscape defined increasingly by confrontation. The security-related principles enshrined in Helsinki were conceived to stabilise relations between adversarial blocs during the Cold War.[1] Even in a deterrence-driven environment like today, they continue to provide essential reference points for restraint, risk management, and crisis prevention.

Historical experience provides valuable guidance. In the early 1980s,amid the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, martial law in Poland, and an intensifying nuclear arms race—the OSCE managed to preserve a constructive East-West dialogue through the Madrid process, anchored in the HFA. This period marked a strategic inflexion point for the OSCE: the 1st dimension gained prominence and paved the way for the Stockholm CSBM process, even within the constraints of the Cold War. The Helsinki (1975) and Madrid (1980–1983) meetings introduced the first generation of CBMs, focused on transparency, information exchange, and basic consultation procedures. Stockholm then transformed these into second-generation CSBMs, adding on-site verification, strengthened political commitments, annual calendars of military activities, exercise constraints, and inspection mechanisms—significant qualitative advances that elevated cooperative security into a more structured and operational domain.

Emboldened by renewed detente following Gorbachev's rise to power, the Stockholm agreements laid the groundwork for subsequent landmark treaties and commitments, including the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF, 1987), the Vienna Document (1990), the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe treaty (CFE), and the 2+4 German reunification treaty.

During this detente period, arms control and CSBMs were closely intertwined with geopolitical developments. Gorbachev's acceptance of mandatory inspections on Soviet territory marked a decisive shift in Soviet security policy and enabled the intrusive verification mechanisms that would underpin the post-Cold War arms control architecture.

The advancement of security cooperation across the East–West divide was largely driven by the diplomatic character of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). Its model of *conference diplomacy*,a deliberately non-institutionalised and slow process operating outside military alliances offered the flexibility and multilateral legitimacy needed to bridge Cold War divisions.

The CSCE's light institutional footprint enabled it to multilateralise East–West relations by shifting key exchanges beyond Soviet–American bilateral channels and also empowered smaller European states, particularly the neutral and non-aligned countries (N+N), to contribute to European security. The HFA redefined security comprehensively through its "three baskets," embedding political, military, economic, environmental, and human-dimension issues within a single framework. The 1st Dimension gained traction precisely because it was integrated into this comprehensive concept, rather than treated in isolation. Ultimately, the CSCE's strength lay in its nature as a flexible diplomatic process rather than a fixed, rigid organisation, which enabled major breakthroughs before its formal institutionalisation as the OSCE in 1995.

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1   Sovereign equality, territorial integrity, peaceful dispute settlement, restraint, transparency, and predictability

Post-Cold War Transformation and the Charter of Paris for a New Europe (1990)

The end of the Cold War ushered in a fundamental reordering of the European security landscape. Building on the principles of the HFA, the 1990 Charter of Paris for a New Europe captured this historic shift. European security was redefined as "whole and free," replacing confrontation with a vision of cooperative security rooted in shared values, democratic governance, and peaceful dialogue.[2]

With the reunification of Germany and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the CSCE started to actively assist former communist countries in their transformation towards democratic governance and stability. Concurrently, NATO expanded its role to include out-of-area crisis management, notably in response to the Balkan wars of the 1990s. The Paris Charter reaffirmed commitments to military transparency, democratic governance, and arms control, while a series of East-West agreements laid the foundation for a rules-based European security order.[3]

The end of the Cold War left Europe with a vast surplus of conventional weapons, creating both an opportunity and an imperative for cooperative arms control and disarmament. Within this context, the CFE treaty introduced legally binding national ceilings on key categories of military equipment, aiming to reduce the risk of surprise attacks and large-scale offensives.[4].

In parallel, the Vienna Document emerged as a central pillar of the OSCE's politico-military dimension, establishing a CSBM regime built on transparency, regular military information exchanges, advance notifications, and on-site inspections and visits. These instruments considerably strengthened mutual trust and predictability, reducing the risk of miscalculation and escalation. Through revisions, the Document was adapted to reflect the evolving security environment. However, subsequent efforts to modernise it after 2011,particularly to strengthen verification mechanisms and better integrate it with the OSCE's conflict-prevention and crisis-response toolkit under the Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC), ultimately stalled due to lack of consensus.[5]

Institutionalising the 1st Dimension: The Forum for Security Cooperation

The 1990s offered a historic window of opportunity for shaping a peaceful, democratic, and integrated Europe. The dissolution of ideological blocs unleashed a surge of optimism, famously encapsulated by ideas like 'The End of History,' demonstrating an unwavering belief in the triumph of liberal democracy and the promise of cooperative security.[6] The 1992 Helsinki Summit marked a critical point as it translated post–Cold War

2 President Bush, 'A Europe Whole and Free,' Remarks to the Citizens in Mainz, by President George Bush, 31 May, 1989.

3 2+4 Agreement (1990) – German unification

CFE Treaty (1990) – Eliminating offensive military capacities

Vienna Document (1990, 1992, 1994, 1999, 2011) – CSBMs and verification framework

Open Skies Treaty (1992) – Aerial verification and transparency
NATO–Russia Founding Act (1997)- formal partnership aimed at overcoming Cold War antagonism.

4 For details see: A. J. K. Bailes, and I. Anthony. 'Military Legacies of the Cold War in Europe: The General Challenge,' In Relics of Cold War: Europe's Challenge, Ukraine's Experience, SIPRI Policy Paper No. 6, pp. 1–34.

5 Food for Thought Paper and Proposal for a VD Plus Draft Decision Risk Reduction (Chapter III) Improved Mechanism for Consultation and Co-operation as regards Unusual Military Activities (Article 16), OSCE Germany 2016 (unpublished).

6 Fukuyama, Francis. 'The End of History', The National Interest, no. 16, Summer 1989, pp. 3–18.

aspirations into institutional and operational commitments, driving the transformation of the CSCE into the OSCE.

As part of this institutionalisation process, the Forum for Security Cooperation (FSC) was established to address politico-military security issues. As one of the OSCE's two main decision-making bodies, alongside the Permanent Council, the FSC adopts consensus-based, politically binding decisions and fosters dialogue through regular Security Dialogues and two dedicated Working Groups.[7] The FSC's scope eventually also included normative frameworks and practical projects on Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW), Stockpiles of Conventional Ammunition, and mine action, broadening the OSCE's arms control regime.

Another key achievement of the FSC, and arguably the most significant one, is the 1994 Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security. This was the first agreement to set out intra-state commitments regarding security governance and the democratic control of armed forces. It introduced norms for civilian oversight, military professionalism, and transparency through annual exchanges and peer dialogue. Particularly impactful in post-Communist states, the Code institutionalised accountability and remained a cornerstone of the OSCE's cooperative security framework, promoting responsible security governance and contributing to conflict prevention across the Euro-Atlantic area.[8]

Consolidating the Arms Control Regime: The 1996 Lisbon Document

The 1996 Lisbon Document marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of the OSCE's politico-military dimension, as it completed the institutional framework for arms control and cooperative security. It emerged in a changing geopolitical environment where traditional realist paradigms,focused on alliances, deterrence, military balances and spheres of influence,were no longer sufficient to explain post–Cold War security dynamics. In response, the Lisbon Document articulated a common and comprehensive security model, grounded in co-operative security, the indivisibility of security, shared democratic values and transparency, thereby redefining the strategic foundations of European security for the post-bipolar era.[9]

While the envisioned cooperative security model remained an aspiration, a central achievement of this era was the formal adoption of the Framework for Arms Control. This politically binding document effectively integrated the three core pillars of Europe's conventional arms control regime: the CFE Treaty (setting limitations on conventional arms), the Vienna Document (establishing CSBMs and transparency measures), and the Open Skies Treaty (enabling mutual aerial observation). This trilogy reflected a comprehensive and cooperative approach to security, embedding arms control within a broader vision of inclusive and collective security.

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7   Loïc. Simonet, *The OSCE Forum for Security Co-operation (FSC): Thirty Years of Politico-Military Acquis and Contribution to Transparency and Confidence-Building in the Euro-Atlantic Region, 1992–2022*, Austrian Institute for International Affairs (OIIP), Vienna, October 2022.

8   Victor-Yves Ghebali And Alexander Lambert, The OSCE Code Of Conduct On Politico-Military Aspects of Security Anatomy And Implementation, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers Leiden / Boston, 2005.

9   Lisbon Declaration on a Common and Comprehensive Security Model for Europe for The Twenty-First Century, Lisbon Document 1996 , p. 10, Lisbon, OSCE.

The 1996 Lisbon Document significantly solidified the OSCE's role across the full conflict cycle. It reinforced the established connection between arms control and conflict prevention while simultaneously broadening the scope of the 1st Dimension (the politico-military sphere) to explicitly include post-conflict reconstruction. This holistic approach was deemed particularly essential in volatile settings like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria. In this way, the document elevated arms control from a mere preventative tool to a fundamental basis for stabilisation and recovery in post-conflict environments.

Adapting to a Changing Security Landscape

In response to violent conflicts in the former Soviet Union and the Western Balkans in the early 1990s, the OSCE sought to enhance its tools for the conflict cycle. For this purpose, the 1999 Istanbul Summit prepared the normative and operational grounds by adopting the Charter for European Security. This new framework emphasised cooperative, comprehensive and indivisible security, and set out concrete obligations,primarily for the Russian Federation,regarding the reduction, withdrawal, or destruction of military forces and equipment stationed outside its national territory, particularly in Georgia and Moldova. Furthermore, at the same period, the escalation of armed violence in Kosovo turned into a major test for the OSCE's first dimension, as the Kosovo Verification Mission (1998–1999) showed both the potential and limits of OSCE crisis-monitoring and early warning.[10] Its failure to stop escalation underscored the need for stronger politico-military instruments and helped shape later first-dimension tools, including post-conflict institution-building under the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK).[11]

NATO's enlargements in 1999 and 2004, combined with U.S. missile defence initiatives and a series of "colour revolutions," heightened geopolitical sensitivities. Tensions further escalated when Russia suspended its commitments to the CFE Treaty in 2007, and the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit signalled that Ukraine and Georgia could join the Alliance. These developments deepened divisions and culminated in the Russia–Georgia war later that year.

In 2010, the OSCE attempted to reset dialogue at the Astana Summit. The Astana Commemorative Declaration reaffirmed core principles from Helsinki and Paris, emphasising that States have equal rights, including the right to choose their alliances. The Summit fell short of delivering actionable outcomes. It reflected a moment of potential that ultimately went unrealised as cooperative security deteriorated further after the meeting.[12]

From Norm-Building to Operational Crisis Management

In the post-Cold War era, the OSCE underwent a significant operational shift, moving from its original mandate of norm-building and stabilising the broader European security order toward managing active conflicts and supporting post-conflict recovery. As violent conflicts erupted across the former Soviet Union and the Western Balkans in the 1990s, the organisation was compelled to rapidly reorient its focus toward crisis response. It took on crucial mediation and monitoring roles in protracted conflicts, including those in Moldova (since 1993), Georgia (since 2008), Nagorno-Karabakh (1992–2020), and Ukraine (2014–2022).

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10   Robert L. Barry After the Bombing: The OSCE in the Aftermath of the Kosovo Crisis, OSCE Yearbook, 1999, pp.49-58.

11   Matthias Niedobitek, The OSCE and Kosovo, in Kosovo and International Law, Edited by

Peter Hilpold, Martinus Nijhoff Publisher, pp. 139-156

12   Farkhard Sharip, Astana OSCE Summit Ends in Division, Eurasia Daily Monitor, Jamestown, Vol. 7, Issue 223, 14. December 2010.

Furthermore, in the Western Balkans, the OSCE proved instrumental in implementing key elements of the Dayton Peace Agreement, particularly through coordinating arms control, supporting institution-building, and undertaking human rights monitoring. [13] This operational evolution, confirming the organisation's role across the full spectrum of security challenges, was formally institutionalised through Ministerial Decision 3/11 in 2011, which officially embraced and formalised the OSCE's conflict cycle approach.[14] It introduced a comprehensive framework for early warning, early action, dialogue facilitation, mediation support, and post-conflict rehabilitation. This marked the first political consensus among participating States to equip and operationalise the OSCE's conflict cycle toolbox of the OSCE Secretariat and its Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC).[15]

Decision 3/11 strengthened the role of the CPC, empowering it to deploy rapid response teams, support special representatives, and coordinate field missions. In this context, the CPC established a Mediation Support Team, offering training, strategy workshops, and toolkits—particularly on inclusive mediation in cooperation with the OSCE Gender Section.[16]. The Team has supported the Trilateral Contact Group in Ukraine, the Geneva International Discussions for Georgia, and the Transnistrian Settlement Process. The CPC also expanded Security Sector Governance and Reform (SSG/R) efforts, aligning with broader OSCE partnerships, particularly with the UN and EU.[17]

Transnational Risks and Threats

|Since the terror attacks of 9/11, the OSCE has significantly expanded its focus in the 1st dimension beyond traditional politico-military issues to address transnational threats such as terrorism, organised crime, cyber threats, trafficking in human beings, and violent extremism. To coordinate cross-dimensional responses, the OSCE established the Transnational Threats Department (TNTD) in 2012, working closely with field operations, participating States, and international partners.

The OSCE launched Cyber/ICT Confidence-Building Measures in 2013 to enhance transparency, reduce misperceptions, and strengthen crisis communication. These CBMs were supported by regional trainings, implementation roadmaps, and information sharing through the OSCE Communication Network to improve cyber resilience.

The OSCE also supported arms control efforts by helping post-conflict countries secure or destroy small arms and light weapons (SALW), while promoting implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1540 to prevent WMD proliferation to non-state actors through stronger legislation and border controls.

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13   Under the Dayton Peace Agreement, the OSCE was mandated to implement several annexes—most prominently Annex 1-B on regional arms control (Articles II–IV), which included weapons limitations, CSBMs, and sub-regional arms control.

14   Decision No. 3/11 Elements of The Conflict Cycle, Related To Enhancing The Osce's Capabilities In Early Warning, Early Action, Dialogue Facilitation And Mediation Support, And Post-Conflict Rehabilitation

15   Raith, Michael. "Addressing the Conflict Cycle: The OSCE's Evolving Toolbox." In OSCE Insights 2020, pp. 43–58. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2020

16   Inclusion of Women and Effective Peace Processes: A Toolkit, OSCE, 2019https://www.osce.org/secretariat/440735?utm_source=chatgpt.com

17   OSCE Secretariat. The OSCE Approach to Security Sector Governance and Reform (SSG/R): Report by the Secretary General of the OSCE. Vienna: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 20 March 2019.

From Stagnation to Breakdown

The erosion of key arms control frameworks,marked notably by Russia's suspension of the CFE treaty in 2007 and the United States' withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty in 2020, revealed how fragile cooperative security had become in an era of renewed geopolitical rivalry. As conventional arms control mechanisms eroded, the OSCE remained one of the few multilateral platforms capable of maintaining the potential for mitigating military risks through dialogue and CSBMs.

The 2011 update of the Vienna Document aimed to modernise CSBMs, but implementation faced mounting challenges, particularly amid the East-West confrontation triggered by Russia's interventions in Ukraine. Western states accused Russia of evading notification requirements by fragmenting large-scale exercises into smaller, unreportable manoeuvres and using unannounced snap exercises to bypass transparency commitments.[18] Nevertheless, the Vienna Document remained relevant before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, notably through Chapter III, paragraph 16 on consultations over unusual military activities. Days before the invasion, Russia rejected inspection requests and refused mandatory meetings, breaching key commitments and weakening the OSCE's crisis prevention role. [19]

Regarding conflict prevention and crisis management, the OSCE was able to deploy key instruments from its toolbox in 2014, following the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of armed violence in the Donbas. In response to escalating tensions, the Swiss OSCE Chair played a pivotal role in establishing the Trilateral Contact Group in 2014. This group brought together representatives from Ukraine, the Russian Federation and the OSCE to facilitate dialogue and de-escalation across Ukraine. The Swiss OSCE Chair also negotiated the mandate and initiated the deployment of the Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine, which quickly became a central pillar of the OSCE's operational presence on the ground.20 The mission became a pioneer in the operational use of drones and other surveillance technologies, setting new standards for monitoring and verification in conflict settings.

Despite early cautious optimism, the Minsk Agreements of 2014 and 2015 did not achieve lasting peace. Persistent ceasefire violations, the absence of enforcement and accountability mechanisms, and limited political will prevented meaningful implementation. The failure of the Minsk Agreements created negative narratives that constrain future OSCE efforts to pursue a peaceful solution to Russia's war against Ukraine.

Cooperative security has been seriously affected during the post-2014 period, and as traditional security tools stalled, the OSCE shifted its focus to non-traditional threats where consensus remained possible. The 2016 launch of the Structured Dialogue created a new forum for discussing risk reduction, arms control and hybrid threats, despite political gridlock. While divergent views limited its scope, it allowed continued informal dialogue on pressing pan-European security concerns. In 2021, the OSCE achieved a rare Ministerial Council consensus on addressing climate-related security risks, with a focus on regional cooperation, adaptation, and

18   Gabriela Iveliz Rosa Hernández, "Whither Conventional Arms Control in Europe?," in OSCE Insights, eds. Cornelius Friesendorf and Argyro Kartsonaki (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2024), p113. https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748917366-08

19   Op.cit. p.114.

20   "A Peaceful Presence: The First Five Years of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine", OSCE, 2021.

environmental diplomacy, particularly in vulnerable regions such as Central Asia. This example underscored the OSCE's value as a flexible, established platform for addressing complex transnational challenges, such as environmental degradation, migration, and counter-terrorism. These transnational challenges fundamentally transcend antagonistic positions and require consensus-based cooperation across all participating States, irrespective of the current geopolitical climate.

Conclusion: Safeguarding the Acquis in an Age of Deterrence and Technological Disruption

As the Helsinki Final Act marks its 50th anniversary, the security architecture it helped establish stands deeply eroded. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has produced a geopolitical rupture, suspended crisis-management mechanisms, and undermined the trust required for consensus-based diplomacy. The cooperative security paradigm has been displaced by a deterrence-driven landscape, offering little prospect for a rapid restoration of crisis management and conventional arms control.

Yet institutional paralysis does not make the HFA obsolete. In a climate defined by mistrust and elevated military risk, its foundational logic of managing danger through transparency, predictability, and respect for agreed norms remains indispensable. These principles continue to provide a "common vocabulary" of restraint and behavioural reference points that can moderate escalation even in the absence of full cooperation.

While treaty-based regimes have stalled, the OSCE's "soft" assets, including its institutional memory, agreed commitments, field missions, and convening power retain strategic relevance. For this purpose, the OSCE should prepare the ground for a future reset. The OSCE should safeguard lessons from Minsk and the SMM, maintain ceasefire-monitoring standards, and retain rapid deployment capacity. This would provide a minimal yet essential foundation for any future political opening, whether for a ceasefire in Ukraine or renewed risk-reduction dialogue. The current phase should therefore be seen as one of strategic preservation, not paralysis.

At the same time, the OSCE must widen its lens to address emerging technological threats such as AI, drones, cyber operations, information warfare, and data weaponisation that were accelerated by the war in Ukraine. UAV proliferation heightens the risk of hybrid warfare and civilian harm. Existing mechanisms of the 1st dimension offer a starting point: the FSC and the Global Exchange of Military Information (GEMI) could facilitate voluntary listing and engage in principled use of UAVs, clarifying normative conditions, strengthening transparency and reducing miscalculation.

Preserving the OSCE acquis while preparing for future challenges is now the essential task. Until political conditions permit renewed cooperation, the HFA should serve not as a relic of a bygone era, but as a stabilising framework for navigating confrontation and as the foundation upon which any eventual restoration of trust will depend.

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