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Rebuilding Peace and Security in the OSCE Area

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Abstract

The evolving landscape of conflict demands renewed approaches to peace and security, particularly within the OSCE region. The authors argue that the growing number, duration, and complexity of conflicts—exacerbated by technology, geopolitical rivalries, and declining international mediation—require stronger preventive diplomacy, inclusive dialogue, and people-centered solutions. The article underscores the relevance of the UN Charter, the Helsinki Final Act, and the OSCE's unique tools for monitoring, mediation, and peacebuilding. Emphasizing leadership, regional cooperation, and "long-view" strategies, the authors call for revitalized diplomacy, effective conflict prevention, and the restoration of trust as foundations for a renewed European security framework.

Introduction

It is often said that we are living through a period of change, a Zeitenwende. The nature of conflict is indeed changing: there are more of them, and many are of long duration. The human costs are high. Technology is having a growing impact, both on how wars are being fought and on efforts to make peace. If the world is changing, then diplomacy and mediation need to adapt. This article looks at some of the salient challenges to international peace and security, and emphasizes the importance of conflict prevention, mediation, diplomacy and peacemaking. It also underlines the enduring relevance of the spirit and fundamental principles of the United Nations Charter and the Helsinki Final Act and highlights the potential of the OSCE.

The changing nature of conflict

Until about a decade ago, there was a downward trend in the number of violent conflicts in the world. Over the past few years, there has been a dramatic increase in interstate conflicts: in 2011 there were 33, in 2023 there were 59[1]. The pace and intensity of violence seem to be increasing. Even during the period of writing this article, deadly clashes broke out between Iran and Israel, as well as India and Pakistan. As a result of so many simultaneous conflicts around the world, large numbers of people have been killed and millions displaced. Indeed, according to the UN Secretary General, in 2022, a quarter of the worlds' population, nearly two billion people, lived in conflict-affected areas[2] and as of mid-2024 122 million had been displaced[3].

Not only are there more wars, they are lasting longer – many for more than a decade. Think of conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine. Some countries or regions are also trapped in long and deadly cycles of violence: such as Haiti, Sudan, and the humanitarian tragedy in Gaza.

These cycles of violence are turning like deadly wheels in a clockwork of conflict that has a seemingly unstoppable movement. Furthermore, there is a dangerous tendency within and between states to forward political aims by threats, force and violence rather than by diplomacy.

At the same time, peacemaking is in retreat. UN-led or UN-assisted political processes (Libya, Sudan and

1 https://www.uu.se/en/press/press-releases/2024/2024-06-03-ucdp-record-number-of-armed-conflicts-in-the-world

2 https://www.voanews.com/a/un-chief-2-billion-people-live-in-conflict-areas-today/6509020.html

3 https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/overview/figures-glance#:~:text=How%20many%20refugees%20are%20there,forced%20to%20flee%20their%20homes.

Yemen) have stalled or collapsed. There has been a withdrawal of peace operations in parts of Africa; in some cases they have been criticized for becoming part of the problem. Other stabilization efforts have also faltered; the American withdrawal from Afghanistan is a high-profile example. There seems to be little appetite for the international community to engage in difficult situations such as Haiti or Sudan, and mediation by the United Nations has lost considerable relevance and profile. As a result, there is insufficient leadership for peace, and the very organizations that have been designed to promote and maintain security are handicapped by an overwhelming number of crises, a deficit of political will, and a dearth of resources for humanitarian assistance and peace operations, not least because of the costs of conflict and weapons procurement.

Priorities, prevention and anticipation

For diplomats trying to fight so many fires, it is vital to deal with the most urgent situations first and to prevent them from getting worse. In the OSCE area, the priority should obviously be ending the war in Ukraine. Indeed, with so many challenges to international peace and security, regional organizations like the OSCE need to step up, for example in promoting dialogue and facilitation.

The OSCE has had a relatively low profile in Ukraine since the withdrawal of the Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) in 2021. While states, rather than organizations, will likely be the ones to make peace, implementation of any peace agreements may require the support of organizations that enjoy the political buy-in of a wide number of states and which have the tools to carry out monitoring and verification. The OSCE could play such a role, building on its experience. After all, monitoring is crucial to provide unbiased information, particularly when there is a lack of trust between the parties. The SMM's operational reporting in Ukraine between 2014 and 2021 was a rare source of independent monitoring of events on the ground. There may be a role for the OSCE to monitor and verify a ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia, when the time comes.

But only focusing on the crises of the day risks overlooking the warning signs of slower burning situations that could erupt into conflict in the future. Therefore, a greater emphasis should be placed on prevention. After all, as it says in the preamble of the UN Charter, a priority of "we the peoples of the United Nations", was "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war". And the signatories of the Helsinki Final Act underscored their objective of "promoting better relations among themselves and ensuring conditions in which their people can live in true and lasting peace free from any threat to or attempt against their security".

In *A New Agenda for Peace*, UN Secretary General Guterres called for a stronger focus on preventive diplomacy such as in Chapter VI of the Charter that focuses on the pacific settlement of disputes. He also called for making more effective use of regional arrangements under Chapter VIII of the Charter.[4]

The OSCE has plenty of cutting-edge tools at its disposal when it comes to conflict prevention, such as the good offices of the Secretary General and the Chair, the early warning function of field activities and fact-finding missions, as well as the quiet diplomacy of the High Commissioner on National Minorities. What is often lacking is the leadership, both within these organizations and among their members, to use these tools and instruments. The OSCE Troika, in 2025 consisting of Malta, Finland and Switzerland, is well-placed to promote dialogue and facilitation while the new Secretary General, Feridun Sinirioglu (from Türkiye) can use his good offices and vast diplomatic experience to promote and position the OSCE and to help de-escalate

4 https://dppa.un.org/en/a-new-agenda-for-peace

tensions. Together, the Secretary General and the Troika can also mobilize greater support for diplomatic solutions to the conflict. But leadership should not be left to the Troika and SG alone: all participating States with a stake in European security need to make more effective use of the OSCE.

States should not only preserve and strengthen the OSCE as a forum for dialogue and a collective resource for reducing tensions in all phases of the conflict cycle, they should also make use of the field missions and institutions that they have created. The latter can help to build the institutions and capacity that are the bulwark of stable, harmonious and well-governed states. In that respect, the OSCE's role in peacebuilding and achieving Sustainable Development Goal number 16 ('Peace, justice and strong institutions') deserves more credit and support.

In addition to preventive diplomacy and peacebuilding, more time and attention need to be devoted to anticipating potential threats and challenges to try to mitigate or prepare for them. This is what "The Elders" have called 'long-view leadership'[5], characterized, for example, by thinking beyond short-term political cycles and delivering solutions for both current and future generations. Therefore, it is encouraging that the Pact for the Future, agreed in November 2024, takes a forward-looking perspective. Regional organizations should follow suit. The OSCE, for example, should start thinking about the future of European security, not only after the war in Ukraine, but also in the context of a number of threats and challenges on the horizon that could seriously impact all participating States. Such an inclusive, comprehensive and participatory process could restore confidence in the OSCE, and strengthen a culture of dialogue and common purpose among participating States. At a minimum, it could manage distrust in a way that will reduce risks and make Europe safer. This would be consistent with one of Finland's priorities as chair of the OSCE in 2025, namely preparing for the future.

Rediscovering diplomacy and dialogue

International relations today are too often characterized by transactionalism and public monologues. Such an approach is having limited returns, even for great powers. Instead, what is needed is more diplomacy, dialogue and empathy or mindfulness. Too often, positions are entrenched. There is no willingness to listen to the other side, let alone talk to them. The result is policy-making via public statements or social media. This may play well to a domestic audience, but it does not lead to compromise or peace. On the contrary, it may whip up tensions and deepen mistrust.

To counter-act this trend, it is vital to rediscover diplomacy and dialogue. This means having open channels of communication. It means listening to the views of the other side, demonstrating a degree of mindfulness of the positions of others. This is particularly important for mediators. They need to show impartiality, fairness, understanding and respect and act with a degree of humility.[6] As a result, even if parties do not trust each other, they can at least have a degree of trust in the negotiation process. Mediators will also have to possess great patience and a good sense of timing. The right ideas need to be put forward at the right time. Preparation and follow-up are also vital; meetings in isolation build little momentum.

5 https://theelders.org/news/what-long-view-leadership-and-why-are-elders-calling-it

6 The European Union's Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding, interview with E. Apakan, ENTER Policy Brief Series Policy Brief: A Practitioner's View No. 12 – November 2022, https://foreignpolicynewrealities.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Policy_Brief_No_12_rev.pdf

To create a greater pool of qualified mediators, there should be a more systematic approach to learning, training and knowledge-sharing in the field of mediation. This is particularly important as great powers and new actors are becoming more engaged in mediation – often with good intentions but little experience. Furthermore, there needs to be greater innovation in the mediation space in order to cope with the plethora of conflicts, new challenges and opportunities afforded by technology, the impact of violent non-state actors, and engaging more women and civil society actors in mediation processes.[7] In the past, Türkiye and Finland (later joined by Switzerland) established a "Friends of Mediation" group in the United Nations. Today, mediation needs more friends, more resources, and more attention. In addition to Finland as chair of the OSCE in 2025, Switzerland as in-coming OSCE chair and Türkiye, as peacemaker in the Black Sea and bridge-builder between Ukraine and Russia, have important roles to play, as does Norway, as chair of the Structured Dialogue.

The OSCE's engagement in Ukraine between 2014 and 2021 showed both the challenges and merits of mediation. Numerous meetings of the context of the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) on Ukraine were often difficult. But they helped to engage the relevant actors , provided a rare venue for inter-action, and obliged the parties to focus on concrete issues such as demining, concrete humanitarian issues, and negotiating local ceasefires. The TCG also established a clear link between the security and political elements of dealing with the conflict, and factoring in humanitarian and economic issues under a comprehensive approach to building security and trust.

The mandate of the SMM was also broad enough that changes in the situation on the ground did not require amendments. It should be recalled that when the SMM mandate was adopted in March 2014, there was no serious fighting in Ukraine and certainly no Minsk agreements. The word "ceasefire" is also not mentioned in the mandate. But within months, as the security situation deteriorated, this civilian monitoring mission was transformed into a ceasefire monitoring force closely linked – at least in the eyes of the parties – to the implementation of the Minsk Agreements. The mission also made effective use of technology, such as drones and cameras. That said, technology should be regarded as a complement rather than a substitute to human monitors.[8] Here, it is worth paying tribute to the brave men and women of the SMM whose very presence and tireless reporting made a difference, both as an unbiased source of information and for providing support to the civilian population in the conflict zone.[9]

Another key lesson learned is the need for a clear link between the political and the operational. The OSCE was not a party to the Minsk Agreements, it was also not a member of the Normandy Group. Yet, the OSCE is still criticized by some despite the fact that it had no political oversight of the agreements it was supposed to be helping to implement. If, in the future, there is a ceasefire agreement and monitoring mission in Ukraine, one would hope that the UN and/or the OSCE would be the "mother organization" that provides a political mandate and framework. In this way, political processes and field operations could be more closely synchronized than in the past. While monitoring is a technical exercise, it is inherently a political venture. Therefore, if the OSCE is to be called on to monitor a ceasefire, it should be involved at an early stage in the negotiation of a ceasefire agreement.

7 https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/peacemaking-in-trouble-waldman.pdf

8 See https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/MediationResources21_CeasefireMonitoringTechnology.pdf

9 For more on the SMM see "A Peaceful Presence: The First Five Years of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine", OSCE Conflict Prevention Center 2021, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/6/491220_0.pdf

After all, a peace operation is a highly political endeavour, not least one that would separate Ukrainian and Russian forces after such a long and bloody conflict. It therefore needs to be connected to a political settlement and have a politically endorsed mandate. Furthermore, the parties need to be held accountable for any violations of the ceasefire. One of the lessons learned from past experience in Ukraine is that there were few ways of holding the sides accountable for ceasefire violations. A compliance and accountability mechanism, such as a joint military commission, will be vital. Lessons can be learned from the Joint Centre of Control and Coordination, composed of senior Ukrainian and Russian officers between 2014 and 2017, and other relevant international experiences.[10]

People first

Another lesson learned from the OSCE's experience in Ukraine and elsewhere, is the need for a strong focus on the plight of ordinary people. There is a tendency, when talking about conflict, to focus on maps, compare the size of military forces, or to count numbers such as drone strikes or the amount of ammunition expended. Human suffering is often overlooked.

Moving forward, the emphasis on diplomacy should be on putting people first and ensuring their safety and security. A priority should be the protection of civilians from attacks, particularly children and the elderly in armed conflict. The atrocities that we have seen in recent years in Ukraine, Gaza, Syria, Ethiopia and elsewhere do not belong in the modern world, and are a violation of many of the fundamental principles of the UN Charter and Helsinki Final Act which we commemorate this year.

Greater efforts and resources also need to be devoted to reaching and caring for people in need. A growing number of conflicts, coupled with greater inequality and the impact of climate change, result in more people suffering. In 2023, one out of 11 people in the world, and one out of every five in Africa, faced hunger[11]. And when it comes to humanitarian assistance, there is a major disconnect between pledges for humanitarian assistance and money disbursed.

Even where there is political deadlock, it can be possible to do things on the ground that can improve people's lives. The very presence of international monitors can provide reassurance and protection of civilians. In Ukraine, the SMM was able to negotiate and monitor more than 6000 local ceasefires along the contact line that enabled critical repairs of gas, water, and electricity connections as well as infrastructure such as a key bridge in the town of Stanytsia Luhanska. This had a positive effect on the lives of people in the conflict zone. Female monitors, in particular, played a valuable role in reaching out to vulnerable members of the community and for building trust with the local populations. The SMM's more than seven years on the ground shows the importance of the international community being present and is a reminder that peace is not a prerequisite for helping those most affected.

Furthermore, it is vital to engage with the affected communities. Ukraine has a vibrant civil society. Communities that have lived through more than a decade of war should be regarded as agents for change, not just subjects for support.

10 https://www.gcsp.ch/publications/drawing-line-swiss-army-knife-options-achieving-sustainable-ceasefire-ukraine

11 https://www.who.int/news/item/24-07-2024-hunger-numbers-stubbornly-high-for-three-consecutive-years-as-global-crises-deepen--un-report

More broadly, the people and not just their leaders need to be heard. That, after all, was one of the secrets of the success of the Helsinki process: people power to hold leaders accountable to the commitments that they had made. Where is the constituency for peace today?

Inspiration from anniversaries

In this year when we commemorate the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War and the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, it is worth recalling that the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act were both designed to foster security and cooperation, and to reduce the risk of conflict. While the geopolitical situation today is significantly different than it was in 1975 or 1945, the relevance of those foundational documents endures. What is needed, as called for by "Diplomats Without Borders", is an "unbiased return to basics"[12]: to the spirit and the letter of the UN Charter. Furthermore, they call for institutional and attitudinal changes to render the UN more effective in the world of the 21st century.[13] The same could be said for the OSCE. Steps should be taken to make the principles of the Helsinki Final Act more meaningful for present conditions so that they once again become the foundation for a peaceful order in Europe. Of course, the starting point is that all states fully respect and apply these principles in good faith under international law.

States and their leaders need to recognize that in a complex, interdependent world cooperation is self-interest[14]. Furthermore, the consequences of recent violations of international law should remind leaders and their peoples why principles such as those in the UN Charter and Helsinki Finat Act were laid down in the first place: to ensure a degree of predictability, to prevent threats to peace, to settle disputes peacefully, to practice good-neighborly relations, and to promote social progress. Otherwise, we risk returning to an anarchic international system where might equals right, there are no rules, hegemons carve out spheres of influence, and civilians suffer.

In short, as was called for by the OSCE Panel of Experts more than a decade ago, we need to go "back to diplomacy".[15] Europe faces its biggest security challenge since the end of the Cold War. The old security order is changing. The Helsinki principles, which were the foundation for security and cooperation in Europe for half a century, need to be restored, renewed and revived. At the same time, the OSCE needs to adapt to be a key element of a new peace and security framework for Europe. A new security framework based on the foundation of existing principles and commitments can help states and peoples to deal more effectively with the crises of today and be better prepared for those of the future. This would be the most fitting tribute to the drafters of two documents that have been the keystones of European and international security during our lifetimes: the Helsinki Final Act and the United Nations Charter. And it would increase the chances of the peoples of the world and future generations to live in peace.

12 https://www.diplomatswb.org/post/the-future-we-would-like-to-see?

13 Ibid

14 Walter Kemp, Security through Cooperation, Routledge, London, 2022.

15 https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/5/205846.pd

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