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# The OSCE as a Yardstick for Multilateral Security

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**The European security order is dysfunctional and particularly affected by the crisis of multilateralism. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), founded as a forum for promoting co-operative security and standards-based co-operation, today is an expression of the weakness of traditional multilateral institutions. The reporting system in the politico-military dimension of the OSCE is a seismograph for the change in norms and dynamics among participating States. However, it also shows that despite the changes at the political-strategic level and the politicization of the official agenda, the implementation of agreements at the technical-military level of the OSCE continues quite smoothly. This presents opportunities but also risks that the 57 participating States should be aware of.**

The inconclusive 32nd OSCE Ministerial Council meeting in Vienna on 4—5 December 2025 once again made it clear that the concept of co-operative security in Europe is currently not practicable. With Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the United States (US) withdrawal from international forums and commitments, the guiding principles of multilateral action, particularly in the areas of security and democratic institutions, on which the OSCE is based, have come under considerable pressure. The consensus on fundamental principles, as laid down in the United Nations (UN) Charter and the Helsinki Principles based on them, is crumbling. As a result, we are now faced with sometimes very disparate ideas of multilateralism — not only among OSCE participating States.

The pertinent literature speaks of a pluralisation of multilateral formats. These are no longer integrating into a coherent system. Multilateral co-operation is thus increasingly taking the form of competing alliances rather than building blocks of an overarching order. However, tackling transnational challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and the threat of a new nuclear arms race requires collective action more than ever before. Yet universal forums and international organisations that have the mandate to address these problems are increasingly blocked or criticized.

In many respects, the OSCE embodies the fundamental idea of multilateralism in the final phase of the Cold War and the dawn of a new European peace order after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is still con-

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sidered an important forum for dialogue and a potential implementing body for negotiated solutions to conflicts, but the consensus principle and blockade by the Russian Federation are making its structural limitations increasingly apparent.

The legitimacy of the OSCE was based on the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe process, negotiations on co-operative security, and the organisation's claim to represent a comprehensive notion of security. From this, it continues to derive its diverse tasks. However, the very legitimacy of the OSCE is currently in crisis. In addition to its legal status, its core competencies in conflict management are being called into question. Critics attribute this to the organisation's ability to only contain and maintain the status quo at the regional level. Internally, it is subjected to a constant test of endurance between Russia and Belarus and like-minded mostly Western states which, not least due to the erratic course of the current US administration, no longer pursue a consistently unified policy, but in security matters align themselves primarily with the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Added to this are a number of states that cannot be clearly assigned to either camp.

Strategies of other crisis-ridden international organisations to restore their legitimacy have often been based on extensive reform processes. Yet, the OSCE finds itself in a dilemma: Tensions and mistrust between participating States are blocking meaningful institutional reform, which, in turn, prevents the organisation from playing a constructive role in overcoming differences and contributing effectively to European security.

Participating States have chosen to introduce reporting obligations in the first politico-military dimension of the OSCE. These include the areas of conventional arms control, confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs), international agreements, and domestic norms (see Figure, p. 5). Reporting obligations remind the states that by participating in the OSCE, they have committed themselves to certain principles which must be reported upon annually. The willingness of states to fulfil these self-imposed obligations and co-operate in confidence-building measures is a suitable indicator for identifying changes in the norm-compliant behaviour of states and their attitudes toward the multilateral understanding of security in Europe. The present analysis is based on interviews with military advisers from permanent delegations and national ministries of selected participating States, staff from the OSCE Secretariat, and independent experts. These are supplemented by an AI-assisted evaluation of OSCE documents and national questionnaires within the framework of the Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security (CoC).

## Changes in Normative Standards

The OSCE system is not designed for situations in which war is raging between participating States. Consequently, none of the agreed rules and regulations in the area of CSBMs and arms control were designed to prevent wars of aggression. However, in the run-up to the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, there had been numerous indications of an impending invasion, including the concentration of Russian troops in the border region. In addition, a month earlier, Russia had suspended mutual inspections for verification of military facilities under the Vienna Document (VD) on CSBMs, officially citing the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. From then on, inspections, verification visits, and monitoring of military activities beyond thresholds that necessitate notification could no longer be carried out.

After the full-scale invasion began, Ukraine declared that it would no longer comply with its reporting obligations. This led to other OSCE participating States also ceasing to exchange information via the internal communications network with Russia, and Belarus as a co-aggressor. With regard to multilateral reporting obligations in general and the OSCE's CSBM regime in particular, there have been repeated conflict-related reporting deficits on the part

of opposing parties, which have withheld sensitive data.

Failures on the part of individual states also occur regularly. In this context, the OSCE Forum for Security Cooperation (FSC) has a monitoring function, which it exercises with the assistance of the OSCE Secretariat. The Secretariat regularly provides the participating states with briefing material on the information exchanges and documentation of reporting obligations and, in place of the FSC working groups that no longer meet, organizes informal workshops for the delegations and those responsible for reporting in the capitals. Since 2024, there has also been a new reporting tool, Information Management and Reporting System (iMars), which allows participating States to handle the exchange of military information digitally and includes numerous analysis functions. According to interlocutors, it has increased the incentive to fulfil reporting obligations correctly. As it is a visualisation tool, incorrect information is noticed much more quickly than before. As a result, states are now much more vigilant and cautious about what they report. There are still states that do not use it, yet there is no sanction mechanism. Mutual control by participating States themselves makes it costly for individual states to pull out of the respective regimes.

Reporting discipline is particularly high regarding obligations where synergies exist between the UN and the OSCE due to overlaps in their reporting templates.

## Strategic Efficiency at the Expense of Democratic Control

Normative principles of states have been in transition. The annual, publicly accessible exchange of information within the framework of the CoC illustrates this particularly clearly. The core of the CoC is dialogue on domestic elements of security, especially on the democratic control of security bodies. The evaluation of annual questionnaires submitted by participating States sheds light on slow but steady changes in the realm of national military planning and decision-making processes. This change is partly accompanied by security policy transformation processes and paradigmatic shifts.

For many years, the responses of the German government were predominantly characterized by constitutionally justified explanations, supplemented by constitutional case law. Yet from 2018 onwards, a significantly more political line of argumentation can be observed, with a strong commitment to financial and alliance policy obligations. From 2022/2023 onwards, however, the statements clearly reflected the *"Zeitenwende"* policy of the federal government at the time, with more strategic and political language and an explicit return to an "inter-interest-based, value-led security policy". Similarly, in Austria the clear commitment to the defence constitution was gradually supplemented by references to the Austrian Security Strategy and the National Security Council, which from 2014 onwards increasingly functioned as a central hinge between individual ministries. From 2014 at the latest, France's responses also show that in addition to the President, the country's National Defence and Security Council became increasingly significant. Also, the multi-year framework for the defence budget has becoming more closely linked to strategic planning and review processes.

In Belarus and Russia, greater emphasis has been placed on "efficiency" and "further development" of state and military organisation starting in 2014. But here too, more strategic and doctrinal elements have been added since 2014.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and its associated open disregard for the principles of the CoC (including violations of fundamental norms of international humanitarian law in the occupied territories of Ukraine) have, depending on one's perspective, either put its validity to the test or further increased the relevance of the Code.

As far as the possibilities for democratic control of security agencies are concerned, the information provided by Russia (which

has not submitted any responses since 2024) and Belarus can only be read as detached from reality. The information provided by other selected countries illustrates that institutionalised coordination bodies, such as national security councils and multi-annual financial frameworks, increase efficiency and strategic planning, but that this process comes at the expense of transparency (with meetings partly being classified) and thus democratic control (such as lack of accountability to parliaments).

## "No Business as Usual"

Since February 2022, day-to-day political practice and thus reporting in the politico-military dimension of the OSCE has been guided by the "No business as usual" guideline. It is characterized by an ongoing exceptional situation within the organisation that is usually based on the consensus principle and is now struggling with methodological and thematic restrictions. Under "adapted implementation", certain states have decided to not make all information available anymore to all other states. As a result, the community of participating States can now be divided into three groups: the large majority that adheres to the regimes and reliably implements and abides by the obligations; those (mainly states on NATO's eastern border with Russia) that are still formally implementing the agreement but are no longer willing to transmit substantial security-sensitive information to certain states; and the third group, mentioned before, which tends to be passive in implementation issues and, in the context of information exchanges, responds only partially, selectively, or not at all. The cancellation of many face-to-face meetings and thematic sessions, which had already characterized the Covid-19 pandemic phase, and the current deadlock in the organisation have led to a situation in which arms control and CSBMs are now taking place almost exclusively at the technical-military level.

The bottom line is that 2022 is seen as a turning point in the way in which participating States deal with one other. Since then, the area of military information exchange has increasingly been used to signal political messages. This, however, has had less of an impact on the concrete implementation of voluntary commitments and technical reporting obligations, even if there have been cases of non-compliance. The value of multilateral procedures in the politico-military dimension remains uncontested at the level of national military advisers and arms control inspectors. At this level, there is also still a stronger consensus based on a shared military identity regarding the necessity of continuing implementation and the future relevance of these agreements. At the political level, though, this attitude is far less clear-cut, as the OSCE regimes are often viewed as "fair-weather instruments" or relics of a bygone era.

## Selective Application of Standards

CSBMs and arms control are increasingly seen as complementary to deterrence in defence matters. Transparency regarding military stocks and capabilities can also have a certain deterrent effect. This is unlike, for example, what is suggested by the policy of "strategic ambiguity". Signals could be sent out about what could and would be used in a defence situation. In addition, military transparency can help avoid misinterpretations.

There are several voluntary questionnaires as annexes to the CoC. Their genesis highlights the problem of selective assertion of convictions within the OSCE. While the questionnaire and information exchange on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (Women, Peace, Security), the so-called Women Peace and Security Agenda, figures an acceptable response rate (in 2024, 40 out of 57 participating States responded), the relatively young information exchange on the "Children and Armed Conflict" Agenda is controversial. Rather than being decided by consensus, it was put on the agenda by a small group of states (group of friends). As a

*Figure*

**Reporting obligations in the OSCE**

| Type of information exchange | Annual deadlines | Accessibility | OSCE decision / UN reference |
|---|---|---|---|
| Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security (CoC)<br>■ Annual questionnaire<br>■ Optional annex: Women Peace and Security<br>■ Optional annex: Private military and security companies<br>■ Optional annex: Children and armed conflicts | 15 April | Public | DOC.FSC/1/95<br>FSC.DEC/2/09<br>UNSCR 1325<br>Montreux Document<br>Initiative of the OSCE Group of Friends on Children and Armed Conflict; UNSCR 2427 (2018) |
| Exchange on Conventional Arms Transfers<br>■ Conventional Arms Exports / Imports<br>■ Questionnaire on practices and procedures | 30 June | Public | FSC.DEC/13/97<br>FSC.DEC/8/98<br>FSC.DEC/8/08<br>FSC.DEC/20/95<br>UN Arms Trade Treaty |
| Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW)<br>■ Exports / imports<br>■ Surplus / seized and destroyed<br>■ SALW / Stockpiles of Conventional Ammunition | 30 June | Public (public only if required by submitting participating States) | OSCE Document on Small Arms and Light Weapons<br>FSC.DOC/1/00/Rev.1<br>OSCE Document on Stockpiles of Conventional Ammunition<br>FSC.DOC/1/03, FSC.DEC/4/08<br>UN Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons |
| Anti-Personnel Mines and Explosive Remnants of War<br>■ Amended Protocol II on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Mines, Booby-Traps and Other Devices annexed to the 1980 Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW)<br>■ Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction<br>■ Voluntary addendum on explosive remnants of war | 31 May | Public | FSC.DEC/7/04<br>UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, amended Protocol II<br>Ottawa Convention<br>CCW Protocol V |
| Vienna Document<br>■ Annual Exchange of Military Information<br>■ Defence planning and military budget<br>■ Information on Contact visits<br>■ Annual calendar of military activities<br>■ Constraining provisions | 15 December<br><br><br><br><br>15 November | Not Public | Vienna Document 2011<br>FSC.DOC/1/11 |
| Global Exchange of Military Information (GEMI) | 30 April | Not Public | DOC.FSC/5/96 |

result, the majority of states still ignores this decision and has not respond to the corresponding questionnaire (the response rate in 2024 was 15 states).

## Multilateralism as a Burden

Participating States must meet certain deadlines throughout the year (e.g., mid-April for the CoC, end of June for the return of the questionnaire on measures taken under the VD and on small arms, light weapons, and conventional ammunition, and mid-December for information on the armed forces within the framework of the VD and the Global Military Exchange (see Figure 1, below). The sheer volume of information exchanges, reporting obligations, and national action plans requires analysis, organisation, and coordination from the relevant arms control and verification units. In addition, there are often inspection activities for which there are no specific structures in place. For smaller states, these multilateral obligations are a particular burden. Ultimately, however, even smaller states described the exchange of information at the technical-military level as strategically important and as a "fallback" mechanism in the event that, due to increasing politicisation, decision-making in official bodies and forums proves difficult.

## Areas of Application under the Radar

In the shadow of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, it is hardly noticed that the politico-military dimension of the OSCE has a wider scope of application. At the regional level, measures in accordance with the provisions of the VD (inspections, verification visits, and joint inspection exercises) continue to take place every week, but these are conducted below the threshold of political public awareness. The verification and compliance part of the implementation of the Dayton Agreement between the four Western Balkan states of Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina (Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina) is also flying under the radar. Within the framework of a sub-regional arms control regime (Dayton Agreement, Article IV, Annex 1B, known as the Florence Agreement), an agreement has been in place between participating States since 1996 that is comparable to the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty and remains central to maintaining security and stability in the region to this day. After many years of monitoring by the OSCE, participating States have taken responsibility for implementing the agreement and now regulate it themselves in a rotating chairships among the four parties.

## Retention of Skills and Expertise

In times of tight budgets and spending cuts, numerous capitals are currently weighing which capabilities and expertise are still necessary for maintaining the costly implementation of the OSCE's first dimension regimes. Several states have reduced their verification capacities, either for budgetary reasons or because they were no longer politically justifiable. The German side is comparatively well positioned, with experienced personnel in Vienna and the Bundeswehr Verification Centre (ZVBw), whose tasks include fulfilling national verification obligations, planning, and implementation. Skills in processing military information are taught at the ZVBw in international courses. The result is that the ZVBw has become a training partner for a number of other states.

The erosion of technical expertise is seen as a cause for concern by interviewees. Verification personnel and military advisers with many years of experience and theoretical knowledge are gradually rotating out of the organisation. They are being replaced by young military personnel that have never experienced the OSCE in anything other than a state of emergency. There is a risk that should the OSCE return to normal operations in the future, relevant expertise will merely be available in a rudimentary form. In addition, experience in OSCE-specific work processes and personal arms control networks are also at risk of disappearing. When a ceasefire agreement or

peace treaty is concluded after the end of an armed conflict, agreements that can be verified are usually required (such as rules on separation and transparency, as well as control, reduction, and the destruction of weapons). The OSCE has very relevant expertise in these areas.

## Outlook: Opportunities and Risks of Multilateral Commitments

Multilateral institutions such as the OSCE will continue to offer opportunities in the future, especially in the realm of regional security. Particularly for states that are neither aligned towards Russia in terms of their security-political orientation nor integrated into Western alliances (which amounts to around 15 states that consist of the group of neutral states, the Central Asian states, and the microstates), the OSCE remains an important forum for transnational exchange on security issues. While multilateral organisations are one channel among many for larger states, they represent a safety net for smaller states because they have the opportunity in such contexts to jointly pursue a policy that can counterbalance the more influential and powerful states.

At the regional level, there is still potential for the implementation of arms control agreements and CSBMs. This is illustrated by the sub-regional arms control regime in the Western Balkans that continues to be developed as part of the Dayton Agreement. The ongoing implementation of voluntary commitments by participating States at the technical-military level shows that, for example, another regional mechanism could follow suit even after a prospective peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The OSCE continues to have a comprehensive toolkit for implementing negotiated solutions to conflicts, including in the area of post-conflict rehabilitation. The key to this is regional agreements between a smaller number of states that establish mechanisms for the settlement of disputes, confidence-building, and early warning, thus creating a balance of interests that would no longer be possible at the level of all participating States.

In recent years, the continued existence of the OSCE has depended largely on the commitment of certain key states. In addition to Germany, these states were primarily Switzerland as a neutral state, Austria as the seat of the OSCE, the Nordic states, and individual NATO states. The change in the US administration has made dynamics more complex and unpredictable. This has also affected US financial contributions, reporting obligations, and general commitments within the organisation. The Troika states, in particular, are finding it increasingly difficult to counter the numerous blockades, malign narratives, and attempts to influence — especially, but not only, by Russia. The importance of the so-called bridge states has increased again since 2022. In these uncertain times, they can ensure a certain balance between states. In fact, in addition to the classic mediators Switzerland and Austria, other states are now entering the floor: Turkey due to its own channels of communication with the Kremlin, Malta as the 2024 chair tolerated by Russia, and Norway due to its shared border with Russia and the resulting informal channels for crisis prevention.

Participating States (at least key OSCE States) took the political and strategic decision to retain the arms control and CSBM instruments, even though they need reform. New technologies (especially in the field of drones and artificial intelligence) would have to be considered. However, the forces of inertia in the form of blocked and politicised decision-making bodies in the OSCE are strong. They represent a major obstacle to further developing the regimes and regaining the legitimacy of the organisation as a whole. The extensive decoupling of the political from the military-technical level with the corresponding knowledge, best practices, and recommendations, represents a further obstacle. Criticism of the regimes often ignores their actual purpose and obscures their potential benefits. The fact that the need to maintain capacities,

skills, and expertise in these areas is sometimes overlooked may have far-reaching consequences. So far, much of this has been absorbed by the Secretariat and the FSC Support Unit, but here too, capacities and personnel are limited.

Although marginalized, the OSCE remains a point of reference for many participating States alongside the UN, EU, and NATO in terms of their own multilateral security policy positioning. However, the concept of co-operative security, which has consistently characterized the multilateral regimes of the first dimension, must be reconciled with a changing understanding of security that can withstand the challenges of a new multipolar order.



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