

What Role for the OSCE in Addressing the Security Risks of Climate Change?

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Abstract

Since the 2010s, there has been a growing recognition that the impacts of climate change on resources and livelihoods exacerbate instability, conflict, and human suffering. This recognition has permeated various levels and sectors, from national security and foreign policy to international organizations such as the OSCE. This paper examines the role of the OSCE in mitigating climate-related security risks, emphasizing its capacity to enhance dialogue and cooperation among its fifty-seven participating States. It illustrates how addressing the security implications of climate change requires comprehensive regional strategies. By detailing both past and present OSCE initiatives to integrate climate and security considerations into its programming, it demonstrates how the OSCE facilitates collaboration across borders, sectors, and governance levels within diverse political landscapes, thereby enhancing the trust and cooperation necessary for addressing climate risks to security. The analysis underscores the importance of participatory processes and cross-sector collaboration to scale up climate action. It also highlights the necessity of keeping climate issues high on the global agenda, especially amid rising geopolitical tensions.

Keywords

Climate change, security, cooperation, dialogue

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Introduction

Climate change has rapidly risen in priority on both national and international security and foreign policy agendas. A key factor driving this development is the growing recognition that climate change poses significant security threats. With issues such as dwindling natural resources and unstable livelihoods emerg-

ing as contributing factors to conflicts and human suffering, the role that climate change plays in adding to these challenges is difficult to ignore. The impacts of climate change—whether forest fires, glacial lake outburst floods, or climate-induced migration and displacement—are rarely confined to a country’s political borders. To avoid, prepare for, and respond to these disruptions, it is therefore essential that countries approach climate and security issues from a regional perspective,

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collaborating on strategies and actions to address short- and long-term climate-related security risks. The identification of shared climate challenges and their impacts, as well as the development of effective solutions to address them, relies heavily on cooperation¹—between governments, local and international organizations, civil society, the private sector, and those most impacted by climate change.²

Because of the transboundary nature of climate-related security risks, security institutions and organizations such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC),³ NATO,⁴ and the OSCE⁵ have increasingly integrated climate change into their agendas. As Anniek Barnhoorn observes, this integration has been taking place in several dimensions, from discursive framing to institutional design and policy action, albeit in distinct ways and to varying extents within each organizational context.⁶

To better understand what role security organizations can play in addressing climate-related security risks, this paper examines the OSCE as a case study. Building on prior research by Bremberg on the OSCE and diplomatic practices in the field of climate-related security,⁷ it explores the broader implementation of the climate-security nexus within the OSCE framework. The analysis investigates how climate change impacts intersect with the OSCE's mandate and comprehensive approach to security and identifies opportunities to address climate-related security challenges through its programming. Fo-

cus is given to the OSCE's experience as a platform for dialogue, which is a crucial entry point for tackling climate-related security risks. We highlight lessons that have emerged from past and current OSCE activities on addressing these risks and outline recommendations for enhancing the mainstreaming of climate change in the Organization's work.

Taking stock: Climate change and security in the OSCE

Climate change and security

In the climate change and security context, security is understood not only in its traditional sense—relating to violence, conflict, and wars—but also more broadly as human security, which touches upon economic, environmental, and sociopolitical dimensions. It encompasses issues such as access to food, water, shelter, and livelihoods, as well as weak governance and related political instability—all of which can impact wellbeing.⁸ Therefore, climate-related security refers to the risks that climate change poses to security, both in the traditional and in the human security sense.⁹ This understanding aligns with the OSCE's approach to security as a broad, comprehensive, and cooperative issue that is expressed across its three dimensions: politico-military, economic and environmental, and human.¹⁰

Climate-related security risks can impact all three OSCE dimensions through different pathways and to varying degrees.

One such intersection concerns competition over natural resources, both in the form of intercommunal disputes over water and land access and use and in the form of diplomatic tensions between neighboring countries in the context of transboundary resource sharing.¹¹ In Central Asia, for example, transboundary water management is a particularly sensitive issue due to conflicting priorities between upstream and downstream countries.¹² These tensions are further compounded by inherited Soviet-era infrastructure and legal frameworks, which were not designed for the specific purpose of cross-border water sharing.¹³ Another key front where climate and security concerns converge is food and livelihood insecurity. When climate change impacts livelihoods, it disturbs socioeconomic dynamics that are crucial for stability, especially in contexts where affected populations, and particularly vulnerable communities, lack alternatives or social safety nets.¹⁴ In Armenia's Lori Province, for example, nearly half the working population is engaged in agriculture, leaving the area's food and livelihood security highly vulnerable to climate impacts on crops, livestock, and essential infrastructure.¹⁵ In some cases, these pressures have led people to resort to maladaptive coping strategies that further exacerbate both climate and security risks.¹⁶ In South-Eastern Europe, for example, climate-induced stress on agriculture and tourism has aggravated employment and economic insecurity. This, in turn, has driven unsustainable

livelihood practices such as illegal logging and hunting.¹⁷

These examples highlight some of the ways in which climate change can interact with and exacerbate insecurity. Additional factors such as age, gender, and ethnicity also play a crucial role in shaping the relationship between climate change and security. Climate-related security risks do not affect all populations equally or proportionally.¹⁸ Moreover, the risks vary greatly depending on the context. This variation reflects not only the uneven distribution of climate impacts across the world but also preexisting conflict dynamics and differing levels of social and economic resilience to external shocks.¹⁹

The context-specific nature of climate-related security risks underscores the important role that regional organizations such as the OSCE play in addressing them. With fifty-seven participating States, and encompassing a large portion of the Northern Hemisphere, the OSCE is in a unique position to identify and respond to climate-related security risks affecting its participating States and, by extension, regional stability.²⁰ Its track record of managing heterogeneity through the promotion of dialogue between states with different—often opposing—political views, priorities, and realities makes it well positioned to support the establishment of the trust and cooperation needed to address climate-related security risks comprehensively and effectively.²¹

Past and present OSCE engagement

In the realm of security, the OSCE has been a forerunner in integrating climate considerations into its agenda. As early as the 1970s, the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE)—the OSCE’s predecessor—recognized the importance of cooperation on environmental issues as part of its comprehensive approach to peace and security.²² In 1997, the OSCE further institutionalized the environmental dimensions of security with the establishment of the Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities (OCEEA) within the OSCE Secretariat.²³

Subsequently, a more comprehensive approach to environment and security emerged, drawing in part on the expertise generated under the Environment and Security (ENVSEC) initiative. Launched in 2003 in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), ENVSEC focused on addressing environmental security risks by increasing cooperation on environmental issues both within and between countries in Eastern Europe, South-Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia.²⁴

Since the late 2000s, the OSCE has adopted a more explicit focus on climate change by recognizing it as a long-term challenge with the potential to amplify existing security risks.²⁵ In parallel, the OSCE and its participating States

have emphasized the need to enhance disaster risk reduction by increasing climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts.²⁶ Through its activities under the ENVSEC initiative, the OSCE has focused on raising awareness of the security challenges related to climate change and identifying pathways for mitigation.²⁷ For instance, leveraging the 2012 Dniester River Basin Treaty between Moldova and Ukraine, which was endorsed and ratified with the support of the initiative for sustainable management of the transboundary ecosystem, ENVSEC facilitated the development of a joint climate adaptation strategy.²⁸ This effort ultimately led to the securing of funding for follow-up activities from the Global Environment Facility.²⁹

The 2021 Ministerial Decision Strengthening Co-operation to Address the Challenges Caused by Climate Change marked a pivotal moment in the OSCE’s engagement with environmental and climate-related issues. This decision explicitly mandates the OSCE to mainstream climate change and related security risks across its work and institutional entities. The political framework also calls on participating States to enhance dialogue and cooperation, emphasizing collective efforts in joint research, investments, and disaster risk reduction and management to build resilience. It positions the OSCE as a platform for sharing information and good practices while recognizing that collaboration on these matters can also be an entry point for “building mutual confidence and promoting

good neighbourly relations.³⁰ This step represents the first unanimous recognition of climate change as a standalone security risk at the highest political level within the Organization.³¹ It emerged amid escalating geopolitical tensions resulting from Russia's increasingly aggressive foreign policy,³² at a time when similar attempts within the UNSC had failed.³³

To put the Ministerial Decision into action and provide a platform for dialogue on climate-related security issues, the OSCE has funded a range of dedicated projects to strengthen climate resilience, adaptation, and mitigation for peace and security across its participating States, led by the OCEEA and implemented in collaboration with OSCE field operations, as well as national and international partners.³⁴ Such activities encompass internal capacity-development measures for field operations, focusing on integrating climate considerations into their work by designing and implementing climate-sensitive programming.³⁵ This also supports field operations in conducting their own capacity-development activities with relevant target groups in participating States. Another priority has been fostering networking and exchange among young people through regional youth conferences and summer schools centered on climate change and security.³⁶ The OSCE has also initiated a long-term climate and security consultation process in South-Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus involving a wide range of stakeholders and sectors at the local, regional,

and international level. Building on these consultations, the OSCE, in cooperation with adelphi, has developed strategies to mitigate identified climate-related security risks across borders.³⁷ The final and ongoing step of this multi-stage process focuses on selecting and implementing pilot adaptation activities from the strategies in each region.³⁸

The launch of the Climate and Security Fund by German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock during the OSCE High-Level Conference on Climate Change in 2023 marks another significant institutional milestone in better addressing climate-related security issues within the Organization.³⁹ This dedicated financial mechanism will enable the OSCE to finance more projects and systematically enhance its climate and security portfolio moving forward.

Lessons from mainstreaming climate change and security

This section presents several insights drawn from the OSCE's experience in addressing climate and security challenges across its programs and activities.⁴⁰

Facilitating dialogue, joint understanding, and solutions

The OSCE offers a platform for participating States to discuss climate-related security risks, fosters a shared understanding of these risks, and encourages the

development of joint solutions. At the political level, the OSCE's convening power can facilitate consensus building and mobilize climate action among participating States through exchange formats such as conferences and summer schools,⁴¹ and the adoption of ministerial decisions.⁴² However, the need for consensus can sometimes mean that politically sensitive issues, as well as concrete language on intergovernmental cooperation, are excluded from the agenda altogether. As a result, operational texts in ministerial decisions tend to adopt softer language—emphasizing the “recognition” of problems, the “promotion” of solutions, and “invitations” to act rather than explicit commitments.⁴³

At the operational level, however, the OSCE is able to adopt a more practical and concrete approach, particularly since many of its activities are funded through extrabudgetary means and do not require political consensus. This enables the OSCE to initiate joint analyses on the links between climate change and security, prioritize challenges and geographical areas, and identify opportunities to address them collaboratively across borders.⁴⁴ In South-Eastern Europe, for example, the OSCE conducted an assessment of climate change and security hotspots, which informed consultations with regional stakeholders from various governmental sectors, civil society, and experts. These consultations identified the Shar/Šara Mountains and Korab Massif area as a key region for cooperation.⁴⁵ Together, participating stakeholders de-

veloped joint adaptation measures to tackle climate-related security challenges in the area, focusing on forest governance, sustainable livelihoods, and infrastructure development. These measures also created broader opportunities for cooperation, such as the establishment of transboundary working groups and study tours.⁴⁶ By creating space for dialogue based on sound analysis and science, the OSCE was able to bring together stakeholders from different countries and sectors, encouraging dialogue, exchange, and joint action.

Supporting cooperation across sectors and levels

Addressing the complex and multifaceted challenges emerging from climate change requires a comprehensive and integrated policy approach.⁴⁷ In response, the OSCE has brought together actors from a wide range of sectors—including security, disaster risk reduction, agriculture, tourism, and the environment—to improve cooperation around climate adaptation and resilience.⁴⁸ This work involves actors from different levels of governance, from local municipalities to national governments, regional bodies, and international organizations. As part of the OSCE's climate-security project,⁴⁹ this multi-level and multi-sectoral approach has generated project ideas that cut across disciplines, ranging from community-level awareness-raising initiatives to the development of intergovernmental coordination frameworks. In

Central Asia, for instance, proposed activities include developing climate-smart villages to support the sustainable livelihoods of mountain communities, involving young people in glacial monitoring and science, and establishing regional policy approaches to human mobility and climate adaptation.⁵⁰ By leveraging its mandate across economic, governance, and environmental issues, the OSCE is uniquely positioned to facilitate cooperation both within and between countries' governance sectors. This support is crucial for developing integrated and coordinated policy portfolios capable of addressing the impacts of climate change.

Bridging political divides

The OSCE's efforts to address climate-related security risks are typically embedded in highly sensitive and complex political contexts. In many participating States, long-standing border disputes—rooted in the establishment of new states following the dissolution of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia—have deeply shaped policies and societies, giving rise to inter-state animosities that are difficult to break through.⁵¹ Nonetheless, although it has struggled amid rising geopolitical tensions, the OSCE has demonstrated an enduring ability to bring countries together. With a participation that continues to span the political East-West divide, the OSCE is one of the few organizations outside the UN with the ability to convene conflicting parties under one umbrella.

This was exemplified by the 2021 Ministerial Decision, which demonstrated participating States' willingness to cooperate on challenges related to climate change. Since then, however, tensions have escalated, further complicating the environment in which the OSCE operates.

Despite these rising tensions, the Organization can leverage its second dimension—particularly its work on climate-related security risks—as a bargaining chip for advancing dialogue and cross-border cooperation, even in the most complex of contexts. By shifting the focus away from political strife and toward common issues that can only be solved through collaborative action, such as transboundary resource management, the OSCE can create openings for constructive engagement. Its strong presence at the local level allows it to design context-specific interventions, examples of which include bringing together municipal leaders from the Armenia-Georgia⁵² and Azerbaijan-Georgia border regions to discuss cooperation on managing transboundary wildfire risks.⁵³ In this way, addressing climate-related security risks not only falls within the OSCE's mandate but also serves as a means of achieving its broader goal of promoting security, stability, and regional cooperation.

Conclusion and recommendations

The climate crisis cuts across many areas, defies political borders, and requires action from all sectors—including the

security sector. With a clear mandate on security matters and a strong presence on the ground through its field operations, the OSCE can engage directly in contexts where these risks emerge. Its further mandate around cooperation means that transboundary issues in particular fall within its remit. Moreover, the OSCE's multidimensional approach to security means that addressing risks from non-traditional security threats also falls squarely within its scope.⁵⁴ The OSCE's past and ongoing integration of climate change and security into its programming demonstrates its potential to address climate-related security risks effectively and serves as a focal point for coordinated action across its participating States. These efforts also offer valuable lessons and guidance for other security organizations seeking to leverage their mandates and programming to tackle climate challenges. As climate change and security issues continue to intensify globally, the OSCE will need to scale up its engagement to drive concrete changes.

Deepen and expand participatory engagement. Looking ahead, the OSCE should capitalize and expand on the opportunities arising from mainstreaming climate change and security to enhance climate action. This commitment is vital to keeping climate issues at the forefront of regional and global agendas, particularly amid escalating international tensions. Identifying shared climate and environmental risks—and working collaboratively toward solutions—can also foster trust among stakeholders, paving the way

for further engagement and cooperation in other areas as well.⁵⁵ The newly established Climate and Security Fund can play a pivotal role in this regard by enabling sustained action on the ground through dedicated climate and security programs and projects. To ensure relevance and sustainability, however, it is essential that these investments support initiatives that are co-designed with regional stakeholders—including civil society and affected communities—and are aligned with existing efforts, frameworks, priorities, and needs.⁵⁶

Support the transition from analysis to action. In addition to addressing climate-related security risks and improving cooperation on environmental challenges, the strategies and pilot projects initiated by the OSCE can also serve as blueprints and starting points for larger, more coordinated, and longer-term efforts by other actors across the OSCE area. Successfully implementing these activities will require an integrated approach that engages diverse actors with a broad range of technical expertise across various sectors and levels. By facilitating consultations, developing strategic frameworks, and piloting measures, the OSCE can play a pivotal role in fostering collaboration and driving further action. Moreover, it can function as an effective intermediary, forging connections between international organizations and key regional and national stakeholders. The successful partnership between the OSCE, the UN, and the Global Environment Facility in the Dniester

River Basin offers a model for this type of cooperation.

While awareness of climate-related security risks has grown over the past decades, practical experience in addressing these risks through programming—transitioning from risk analysis to concrete, collaborative action on the ground—remains limited.⁵⁷ The OSCE’s efforts in mainstreaming climate and security can help bridge this gap. To achieve this, it is essential to monitor and evaluate both past and ongoing initiatives. Sharing insights on how climate change intersects with security—and highlighting effective strategies for tackling these challenges—can contribute to empirical learning in this emerging field.⁵⁸

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