Addressing the Climate-Security Nexus at the OSCE

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Abstract

This *OSCE Insights* paper discusses the growing risks posed by climate-related insecurities within the OSCE area and explores how the Organization, including its Parliamentary Assembly, can respond effectively. Drawing on existing research on the climate-security nexus, the paper identifies four critical climate policy pitfalls: an overemphasis on symptoms rather than root causes, inadequate policy responses, fragmentation and siloization, and societal backlash. In response to these challenges, the paper proposes four guiding principles for addressing climate security, arguing that future policies should (1) be oriented toward prevention, (2) embrace ambitious objectives, (3) encourage whole-of-government coordination, and (4) ensure political feasibility. After briefly reviewing the OSCE's current responses to climate-related insecurities, the paper concludes with recommendations for better integrating these guiding principles into the Organization's existing strategies.

Keywords

OSCE, OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, climate change, climate security, policy principles

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Introduction

Climate change significantly impacts individuals and societies, including those within the OSCE area. As a result, it is increasingly regarded as a security issue by governments and international organizations worldwide. Approximately 70 percent of national security strategy documents published between 2007 and 2020 referenced climate change.[1] Similarly, international organizations, including the OSCE, link climate change and security in their agendas.[2] Academic research emphasizes the broader human security implications of climate change, warning that if these wider consequences are not addressed, they may escalate into more conventional security risks.[3] Given the complexity of climate-related insecurity, policy responses must be informed by a clear understanding of the problem and supported by effective policy design. To this end, the OSCE, including the OSCE

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Parliamentary Assembly, should aim to implement a climate security policy that (1) is oriented toward prevention, (2) embraces ambitious objectives, (3) encourages whole-of-government coordination, and (4) ensures political feasibility.

To support this argument, the paper briefly reviews current scientific findings on the climate-security nexus and the challenges it poses for policymaking. It then proposes four guiding principles for responding to this nexus, while also acknowledging the OSCE's previous efforts to address climate-related insecurities. The paper concludes with recommendations for how the OSCE can further refine and advance its approach to the climate-security nexus.[4]

How does climate change affect security?

Climate change impacts security both directly and indirectly. Direct impacts encompass the immediate consequences of climate change such as heat waves, more frequent and more intense extreme weather events, shifts in local ecosystems, ocean warming and acidification, and rising sea levels. Such events pose a direct threat to the safety, wellbeing, and livelihoods of individuals and communities, manifesting in crises such as heat emergencies and water shortages.[5]

The OSCE area has already experienced several direct impacts of climate change,[6] with serious repercussions for the security and wellbeing of individuals and communities in its participating States. Heat stress is responsible for an estimated 175,000 deaths annually in Europe,[7] and regions in Central Asia that have been identified as climate hotspots continue to face particular challenges related to water resources, agricultural output, and the energy sector.[8] Likewise, North America has increasingly been affected by extreme climate events, including record-breaking wildfires.[9] Beyond human security, the direct effects of climate change also threaten critical strategic resources. Coastal regions, which are essential to global freight trade—responsible for 90 percent of its volume—are particularly vulnerable to rising sea levels.[10] As a result, climate change poses a substantial risk to supply chains across the OSCE area.[11]

Indirect climate impacts—defined as the consequences of individuals' and communities' responses to either the experience or anticipation of direct climate change impacts—can exacerbate insecurity through forced migration and the outbreak of violent conflict. Research highlights that both slow-onset disasters (e.g., droughts)[12] and sudden-onset events (e.g., floods) can increase the risk of armed conflict in fragile states.[13] Under certain conditions, however, severe climate change impacts may also result in (at least temporary) conflict de-escalation, creating openings for peace processes. In 2010, for instance, disasters weakened conflict parties in the Pakistani government's struggle with Tehrik-i-Taliban and in Somalia's fight against Al-Shabaab, reducing the capacities of at least one faction and leaving the others unable to exploit the situation.[14]

As noted above, climate change also affects mobility, contributing to involuntary immobility ("entrapment"), forced displacement, and voluntary migration.[15] Climate migrants often face heightened risks during their journeys, including exposure to extreme weather events.[16] Research from Kenya indicates that individuals displaced by climate-related impacts are more likely to join social protest movements in their destination areas[17] and sometimes encounter tensions with host populations.[18]

The OSCE region is not immune to these dynamics. News reports have documented local clashes over water rights in Turkmenistan,[19] France,[20] and Spain,[21] and climate-related displacement has been observed in Moldova, Portugal, and Spain.[22] Direct and indirect climate change impacts thus pose an immediate danger to the security of OSCE participating States. At the same time, the rise of xenophobic, populist movements continues to heighten the risk of hostility toward climate-displaced populations.

Besides these insecurities, political tensions surrounding climate policies—or their absence—can also trigger conflict and thereby contribute to insecurity.[23] Security is increasingly impacted by political struggles over the socioeconomic transformations required to address climate change, with movements such as Fridays for Future, Last Generation, and Extinction Rebellion driving public protest. These highly visible climate protests have provoked substantial backlash from right-wing populist parties across Europe, such as Germany's Alternative für Deutschland, in the form of anti-climate policy proposals.

Addressing the climate-security nexus

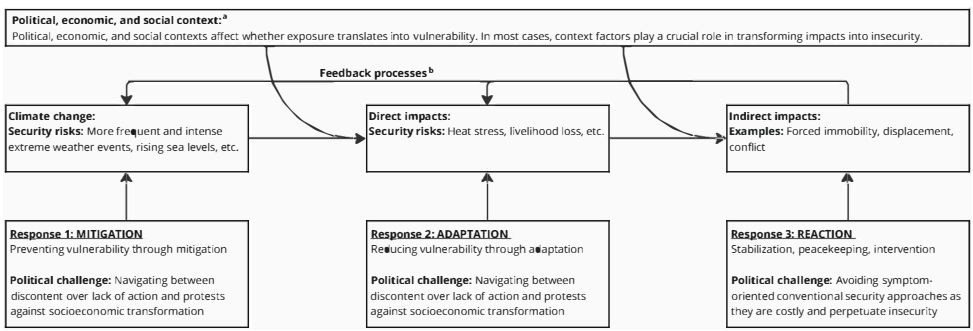
Many domestic political institutions and intergovernmental organizations have sought to respond to various aspects of the climate-security nexus. Their approaches differ significantly depending on their respective tasks. Governments have integrated climate change into their security policies by identifying it as a threat, risk, or policy priority within their national security strategies.[24] At the same time, a growing number of governmental institutions, such as development agencies and ministries of energy and the environment, are increasingly focusing on the security implications of climate change in their respective domains.[25]

Organizations and structures such as NATO and the United Nations Security Council approach climate-related insecurity with a focus on traditional security and diplomacy, whereas institutions such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) emphasize the links between climate change, peace and conflict, and development. Other UN bodies, including the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for

Refugees (UNHCR), approach the climate-security nexus with a particular focus on disaster risk reduction and supporting displaced populations.[26]

Climate security policies aim to interrupt the causal chain linking climate change to security-relevant impacts at three key points (see figure 1). First, *mitigation* seeks to tackle the anthropogenic drivers of climate change itself. Second, *adaptation* seeks to reduce vulnerability to the impacts of climate change. Beyond these conventional climate policy areas, a third approach involves *responding* to indirect climate change impacts such as displacement and violent conflict once they have occurred.

Figure 1. Context-sensitive pathways to climate-related insecurity and policy options



Notes: [a] Climate-related insecurities arise only within specific political, economic, and social contexts, which often play a more important role than climate change as such. [b] Climate-related insecurity manifests itself along nonlinear pathways. For example, indirect impacts (e.g., displacement and conflict) can increase a population's vulnerability to direct impacts. By complicating sustainable transformations, these impacts can in turn contribute to further climate change.

Organizing and institutionalizing responses to climate change–related insecurity is far from straightforward, and some approaches have been shown to be counterproductive.[27] Scholars have identified four problematic features of climate security policies that warrant careful consideration. First, there is a risk of focusing too narrowly on symptoms. Climate security policies too often concentrate on indirect impacts such as violent conflict and displacement, which are only partially caused by climate change[28] and which would be better addressed by targeting the direct impacts of climate change through robust adaptation measures.

A second concern is that climate security policies may prove insufficient, particularly if political attention centers primarily on indirect impacts. Unlike direct climate impacts, which are readily observable and measurable in the present, indirect impacts tend to be perceived as future threats. This perspective encourages

reactive responses to uncertain long-term consequences at the expense of addressing the immediate and observable effects of climate change in the here and now.[29]

Third, scholars have warned of fragmentation and siloization. As discussed above, climate change and climate policies can contribute to diverse forms of insecurity along various pathways. As a result, goals and strategies for addressing climate change as a security policy problem diverge both within and between institutions and organizations. This lack of coherence complicates the implementation of comprehensive security policies.[30]

Fourth, socioeconomic feasibility remains a central concern. Addressing climate change requires urgent, fundamental socioeconomic transformations. Many governments within the OSCE area have committed to achieving net-zero emissions by 2045–2060,[31] in line with Article 4.1 of the Paris Agreement. This entails reducing greenhouse gas emissions to a level that can be offset by natural or technological sinks, that is, "any process, activity or mechanism which removes a greenhouse gas, an aerosol or a precursor of a greenhouse gas from the atmosphere."[32] Striving for such a balance will profoundly affect individuals and communities, as essential aspects of daily life—such as mobility, heating, and industrial production—remain heavily reliant on fossil fuels. The prospect of fundamental change may stoke fears and concerns, which can in turn fuel resistance to climate policies. Populist parties across OSCE participating States have capitalized on these anxieties, promoting climate change denial and opposing transformative policies.[33]

Four guiding principles to address the climate-security nexus

To address the pitfalls faced by climate security policies to date, this paper proposes four guiding principles to enhance their effectiveness. In short, climate security policies must be (1) preventative, (2) ambitious, (3) all-governmental, and (4) politically feasible.

A preventative climate security policy

Preventative policy approaches to the climate-security nexus aim to break the causal chain between climate change and insecurity at the earliest possible stage. They prioritize adaptation over reaction, protecting individuals, communities, and other entities by reducing their exposure and vulnerability to climate impacts.[34] By doing so, these approaches prevent indirect climate change impacts such as displacement and conflict.

Preventative policies pay equal attention to mitigation efforts to limit the impacts of climate change. While adaptation is essential to address the inevitable consequences of climate change, mitigation remains critical to prevent future impacts from becoming so severe that adaptation becomes impossible. Mitigation measures include reducing greenhouse gas emissions and implementing low-risk carbon capture solutions such

as reforestation, afforestation, and other nature-based solutions. Notably, OSCE participating States include some of the highest per capita carbon dioxide emitters worldwide and collectively account for approximately one-third of global carbon dioxide emissions. Mitigation measures within the OSCE area therefore have the potential to contribute significantly to regional and global climate security while reducing the risk of additional direct impacts.

Adopting a preventative approach to the climate-security nexus would come with clear advantages. First, it would align OSCE participating States' activities with their commitments under the Paris Agreement. Second, unabated climate change is certain to cause increasingly severe security-related challenges. Climate security policies that focus on mitigation and adaptation would curtail this process, thereby limiting the overall scope of the challenges to which OSCE participating States will need to respond. Third, addressing climate change directly through mitigation and adaptation, while challenging, is generally less complex than responding to violent conflicts or managing displacement and other indirect impacts on security after they arise. Fourth, by reducing the risk of violent conflict, preventative policies would safeguard earlier achievements in mitigation and adaptation, which are often jeopardized during armed conflicts. War can shift political priorities from long-term climate mitigation toward short-term needs and destroys critical infrastructure such as renewable power plants, forests (which serve as carbon sinks), and coastal and riparian levees. Preventing such setbacks is essential to protecting the long-term benefits of climate security policy. Finally, preventative responses to climate-related insecurity are far more compatible with multilateralism than reactive approaches. Reactive approaches that prioritize responses to indirect climate change impacts once they have arisen (e.g., immobility, displacement, conflict) carry a greater risk of inducing zero-sum competition for shrinking resources.

An ambitious climate security policy

An ambitious climate security policy is one that is responsive to the urgency of disrupting the causal link between climate change and insecurity as quickly and comprehensively as possible. It is not enough to design preventative climate security policies; they must be implemented immediately and on a broad scale. Signatories to the Paris Agreement pledged to "hold the increase in global average temperature to well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels."[35] According to estimates, this will likely require achieving net-zero emissions by 2050.[36] In addition to formulating ambitious long-term goals, however, an ambitious climate security policy will lay out clear pathways to decarbonization, intermediate goals, and transparent monitoring mechanisms to ensure steady progress.[37]

A whole-of-government climate security policy

Whole-of-government climate security policies engage all sectors of government to coherently and collectively address the climate-security nexus. This involves collaboratively setting long-term and intermediate goals and ensuring a clear division and coordination of responsibilities among all participating entities, for example through the appointment of influential high-level climate security policy coordinators. Such an approach strives to prevent siloization and counterproductive turf wars between different organizational units.

A politically feasible climate security policy

Politically feasible climate security policies seek to maintain political support while disrupting the causal link between climate change impacts and insecurities as early and ambitiously as possible. As achieving the latter goal will require fundamental social transformation, carefully crafted policy tools that ensure the long-term support of OSCE participating States' electorates will be essential. Ensuring that climate security policies are regarded as legitimate by citizens and avoiding polarization, which could undermine democratic and institutional security, requires robust and transparent communication regarding (planned and implemented) climate mitigation and adaptation policies, including their relative costs compared to the costs of runaway climate change. Equally essential is countering disinformation spread by actors opposed to climate policy,[38] as well as providing monetary incentives to engage in climate-friendly behavior. Market-based solutions, such as taxes paired with financial transfers, can encourage climate-friendly behavior. Examples include Austria's *Klimabonus* (climate bonus) and Germany's proposed *Klimageld* (climate money), which are designed to redistribute revenue from carbon taxes to benefit low-carbon consumers.[39]

Climate security policy at the OSCE: Recommendations

The OSCE has adopted several political decisions on tackling climate change and security issues. These include the Ministerial Council's adoption of the OSCE Strategy Document for the Economic and Environmental Dimension,[40] the Madrid Declaration on Environment and Security,[41] the Ministerial Council Decision on Improving the Environmental Footprint of Energy-Related Activities in the OSCE Region,[42] the Ministerial Council Decision on Enhancing Disaster Risk Reduction,[43] and the Ministerial Council Decision on Strengthening Co-operation to Address the Challenges Caused by Climate Change.[44]

In parallel, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly has taken substantial steps to engage with the climate-security nexus. Each recent annual session declaration has taken a clear stand on climate change and its security-relevant impacts,

emphasizing the severity of the challenges and the urgency of action. Most recently, this includes the Bucharest Declaration of 2024, the Vancouver Declaration of 2023, and the Birmingham Declaration of 2022.[45] Additionally, in 2023, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly appointed a Special Representative on Climate Change, further solidifying its commitment to the issue.[46]

Through these actions, the OSCE has established itself within the climate-security nexus with a clear agenda. Despite the already considerable tensions over Russia's political course, the OSCE managed to unanimously adopt the 2021 Ministerial Council Decision on Strengthening Co-operation to Address the Challenges Caused by Climate Change.[47] Still, despite this and other important achievements, there is room for improvement.

The 2021 Ministerial Council decision set a clear, preventative focus by emphasizing the environmental and economic impacts of climate change and their relation to developmental challenges and by highlighting the need for mitigation and adaptation. Even so, the decision lacks a sense of urgency and fails to clarify the specific role that the OSCE—as the world's largest regional security organization—should adopt on climate change. As societies within the OSCE area face increasing "transformation conflicts" linked to climate change, the Organization should find ways to address them.

With Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine further complicating unanimous decision-making within the OSCE, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly has an essential role to play in raising awareness about climate-related insecurity and possible policy options. One avenue in this regard is through the Parliamentary Assembly's annual session reports. Currently, statements on climate-related insecurity are largely confined to dedicated resolutions and the section authored by the General Committee on Economic Affairs, Science, Technology and Environment.

Moving forward, the other two General Committees could also make important contributions. The General Committee on Political Affairs and Security could adopt a position on the role of military forces in responding to climate security (e.g., disaster response, reducing greenhouse gas emissions), thereby aligning itself with other international organizations[48] and with the guiding principle of encouraging a whole-of-government approach. With that said, the involvement of conventional security actors must be undertaken in a way that adheres to the guiding principle of focusing on prevention. Clear communication is needed to emphasize that conventional security actors can only make limited contributions in responding to the climate crisis and to avoid overemphasizing indirect climate change impacts.

The General Committee on Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions could also promote prevention by adopting texts highlighting the humanitarian and intergenerational dimension of climate security. Climate change both causes and exacerbates humanitarian crises and disproportionately affects

young and future generations. Intergenerational and North-South climate justice could be integrated into the third chapter of future Annual Declarations. Additionally, the third committee could develop a position on populist backlash against climate policies, advocating for incentive-based decarbonization tools.[49] Such measures would help to ensure that climate security policies remain politically feasible.

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