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**Utilising the OSCE's
Co-Operative Approach
to Security as a Way
to Strengthen Europe-
Central Asia Security
Relations**

by Tobias Kollakowski

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Executive summary

This policy brief shows that the current shifts in the global order and the increasingly volatile geopolitical environment necessitate closer relations between Europe and Central Asia. While European and Central Asian countries have taken measures to strengthen their relationships for several years, there remain significant resource and organizational limitations on the expansion of security and defence relations between both regions. Against this backdrop, this policy brief argues that confidence- and security-building measures, which are carried out within the OSCE framework, could be used effectively to strengthen the security dimension of this inter-regional relationship.

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Introduction

As the world's security environment becomes more multipolar and less stable, increasingly defined by great power competition and acts of aggression – or the threat thereof – by countries that violate the fundamental principles of international law, the European countries aim to prevent the world from falling back into a global order dominated by a few nuclear-armed great powers. Against this backdrop, the foreign and security policy of Germany – the European Union's largest member state as far as population and GDP are concerned – has identified the need to diversify and strengthen relations with other regions of the world, especially with so-called “like-minded” states, i.e. partner countries that are, in most cases, characterised by democratic forms of government and share a strong interest in maintaining the liberal, rules-based order.¹ Still, as Marc Saxer points out, focusing only on countries associated with the Global West is insufficient as far as diversification efforts by European powers are concerned as there are in fact many proponents of rules-based multilateralism that are not associated with the Global West.²

While bilateral initiatives and cooperation on the level of regional organizations are important components of an engagement strategy that aims to foster relations between Europe and Central Asia, this policy brief argues that the OSCE as an international organization assumes a critical function in the development of interregional security relations, but has so far not made use of its full potential. This, I would argue, is particularly true for OSCE extra-budgetary measures and, in theory, confidence- and security-building measures in general.

¹ Auswärtiges Amt. Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific (2020): 9, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/resource/blob/2380514/f9784f7e3b3fa1bd7c5446d274a4169e/200901-indo-pazifik-leitlinien--1--data.pdf>

² Saxer, Marc. “Die Zeit der Wolfswelt.” Internationale Politik Special No. 4. Demokratien unter Druck, (2023): 60–65.

One focus of Europe's and Germany's diversification efforts is Central Asia. In the context of the current situation in international relations, for several years, the European Union and Germany have taken measures to strengthen their ties with Central Asia. Examples include the "Germany-Central Asia" platform, which was launched in 2023, and the "EU-Central Asia Summit" that took place in April 2025 for the first time.

Central Asia in a shifting security landscape – theoretical framework

In order to place the overarching theme of the 2025 Annual Security Conference at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek – "Central Asia and the OSCE in a Shifting Security Landscape" – within a theoretical framework, this policy brief refers to classical geopolitical theory. According to geopolitical scholar Saul Bernhard Cohen, the spatial hierarchy of the global structure consists of three hierarchically ordered spatial levels: the geostrategic realm, which Cohen defines as "parts of the world large enough to possess characteristics and functions that are globally influencing and that serve the strategic needs of the major powers;"³ the geopolitical region, which according to Cohen is a subdivision of the geostrategic realm; and the state. Outside of the realm structure are regions that do not belong to the hierarchical spatial order, among them – and most important for the purposes of this policy brief – are the destabilized shatterbelts, "whose internal fragmentation is intensified by pressures of major powers from competing realms."⁴

By applying Cohen's concepts to Central Asia, we can identify key developments. From the Imperial Russian expansion during (primarily) the 19th century until approximately the late 1950s, Central Asia was part of the Eurasian Continental Realm that was dominated by Imperial Russia and then the Soviet Union.⁵ Subsequent historical developments,

³ Cohen, Saul Bernhard. *Geopolitics of the World System* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003): 36.

⁴ Cohen, Saul Bernhard. *Geopolitics of the World System* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003): 33, 43.

⁵ The argument presented here is not that Central Asia was not dominated by Moscow's geopolitical interests until 1991 [given that it did remain part of the Soviet Union until its dissolution] but rather that the whole of the Eurasian Continental Realm in the most abstract sense was only dominated by Moscow until approximately the late 1950s. In the following decades, the PRC became another major geopolitical pole in Eurasia, leading to the fragmentation of the respective geopolitical space [the *continental realm* in Cohen's terminology].

such as the Sino-Soviet split, later Sino-Soviet Border War of 1969, the resurgence of China since 1978/79, the resumption of trade relations between China and Central Asia in 1983, the signing of the 1985 Sino-Soviet Economic Cooperation Agreements and, ultimately, the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, led to the emancipation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a major, autonomous geopolitical stakeholder and to a fragmentation of the Eurasian Continental Realm.⁶

Following several decades of significant growth and featuring an enormous landmass and economic power, the People's Republic of China has been consistently expanding its influence in Central Asia. Beijing has built on institutions and international formats such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and, since 2023, the China-Central Asia Summit to broaden its influence. Beijing is the largest trading partner for four of the five Central Asian states and has made access to Central Asian energy resources a top priority. Furthermore, according to journalist and geopolitical analyst Matthew Fulco, in the first half of 2025, Central Asia attracted more investment under the Belt and Road Initiative than any other part of the world except Africa.⁷ For several years now, China's relationship with Central Asia has been growing beyond the economic dimension to include security initiatives as well. At the 2023 China-Central Asia Summit, Chinese President Xi Jinping declared that the People's Republic was "ready to help Central Asian countries strengthen capacity building on law enforcement, security, and defence; support their independent efforts to safeguard regional security and fight terrorism; and work with them to promote cyber-security."⁸ During recent years, China's partnership with Tajikistan has received particular attention. Apart from the establishment of a security facility by Chinese state agencies in Tajikistan's Pamir region, Sino-Tajik security

⁶ Levine, Steven I. "Sino-Soviet Relations in the Late 1980s: An End to Estrangement?," in: Grinter, Lawrence E. and Kihl, Young Whan (eds.), *East Asian Conflict Zones: Prospects for Regional Stability and Deescalation* (Palgrave Macmillan: London 1987), pp. 29-46; Karrar, Hasan H. "The resumption of Sino-Central Asian trade, c. 1983-94: confidence building and reform along a Cold War fault line," *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 35 Issue 3 (2016), pp. 334-350.

⁷ Sutter, Robert G. *Foreign Relations of the PRC: The Legacies and Constraints of China's International Politics since 1949* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 2013): 258 ff.; IISS, "The first China-Central Asia Summit," October 2023, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2023/the-first-china-central-asia-summit/>; Fulco, Matthew, "Beijing Deepens Footprint in Central Asia," *China Brief*, Volume 25 Issue 19, 17 October 2025, <https://jamestown.org/beijing-deepens-footprint-in-central-asia/>

⁸ International Department of Central Committee of CPC, "Full text of Xi Jinping's keynote speech at China-Central Asia Summit," 19 May 2023, https://www.idcpc.gov.cn/english2023/ttxw_5749/202306/t20230609_159248.html

cooperation involves investments from Huawei to build a surveillance infrastructure, Chinese military aid, and joint exercises between the Tajik and Chinese militaries.⁹

Additionally, the foreign and security policy of the Russian Federation, a country that had been reduced to a rump state after 1991, has aimed to restore Russia's dominant position in the post-Soviet space – a space then-President Dmitry Medvedev referred to as the zone of Russia's "privileged interests" in the aftermath of the 2008 Russo-Georgia war – for more than twenty years.¹⁰ As a consequence, the Kremlin has made use of institutions, for example the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) or the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU); economic instruments such as sanctions; and military might to re-establish its position of power in Eurasia.¹¹ The war in Ukraine demonstrates that the Russian Federation is willing to break even fundamental principles of international law to prevent constituent parts of the former Eurasian Continental Realm from integrating into the North Atlantic, another competing geostrategic realm.

If these geopolitical developments are left unattended, likely scenarios involve Central Asia being reintegrated into a foreign-dominated geostrategic realm, great power bloc, or condominium – likely with the People's Republic of China as the dominant power – or Central Asia descending into the status of a shatterbelt along with negative side-effects such as internal fragmentation or external intervention.

This new era of confrontation in international relations gives rise to some uncomfortable questions. Why invest in the United Nations when

⁹ Lemon, Edward and Norov, Ruslan, "How China is Adapting to Tajikistan's Demand for Security Cooperation," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20 March 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2025/03/how-china-is-adapting-to-tajikistans-demand-for-security-cooperation?lang=en>

¹⁰ Kremlin, "Встреча с представителями Совета по международным отношениям 16 ноября 2008 года," 16 November 2008, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/2092>

¹¹ Mankoff, Jeffrey, "Russia, the Post-Soviet Space, and Challenges to U.S. Policy," pp. 40–41, in: Colton, Timothy, Frye, Timothy, and Legvold, Robert (eds.), *The Policy World Meets Academia: Designing U.S. Policy toward Russia* (Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences 2010), pp. 37–49; Gvosdev, Nikolas K. and Marsh, Christopher, *Russian Foreign Policy: Interests, Vectors and Sectors* (CQ Press: Thousand Oaks, CA 2014), p. 183; Miller, Chris, "Why Russia's Economic Leverage Is Declining," Transatlantic Academy Paper Series No. 7 (2016), https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Miller_RussiasEconomicLeverage_Apr16_web.pdf, p. 8; Szálkai, Kinga, "Russia's Recent Military Buildup in Central Asia," Center for Strategic & International Studies, 25 September, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/russias-recent-military-buildup-central-asia>; Götz, Elias, "Near Abroad: Russia's Role in Post-Soviet Eurasia." *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 74 No. 9 (2022), pp. 1529-1550.

taking unilateral action promises to be more effective and the return on investment in international institutions is low because these institutions are deadlocked? What kind of impact can international organizations have in an era in which international politics is shaped and dominated by great power competition?

While these questions are more difficult to answer from a political science perspective, from the perspective of national interest, the answer is clear-cut: international organizations can have an important impact indeed. The reason is as follows: at a time when some governments instrumentalize one-sided relations and dependencies as vehicles for political and economic coercion, there is much need to diversify political and economic relations. Taking into consideration that – up to now – European engagement efforts towards Central Asia have been limited, neither Europe, including Germany, nor the Central Asian countries themselves can have an interest in a Central Asian region that is geopolitically dominated by external great powers. Equally undesirable is a future in which Central Asia descends into “shatterbelt” status. It is thus in the interest of both Europe and Central Asia to overcome intra-regional conflicts in Central Asia, to strengthen inter-regional ties and offer a broad range of cooperation measures in the security policy dimension, and to support cohesion in the region as a whole, especially when dealing with extra-regional major powers. In the words of the Joint Declaration of the EU-Central Asia Summit: “significant efforts have been made to strengthen regional cooperation within Central Asia, overcoming challenges and fostering closer partnerships to ensure prosperity, sustainable development and to accelerate the energy transition and decarbonisation, strengthening stability, security, and good neighbourly relations.”¹²

The Central Asian states have been advancing along this line. On the intra-regional level, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been pursuing a policy of reconciliation after several years of violent border clashes that have claimed numerous lives.¹³ Following a peace deal that was signed between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in September 2022, a landmark treaty was signed in March 2025 that definitively demarcates the

¹² Council of the European Union, “Joint Declaration following the First European Union-Central Asia Summit 4 April 2025, Samarkand, Uzbekistan,” 03 April 2025, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/rdfjrb55/250403_eu-ca-summit_joint-declaration_final.pdf

¹³ Davies, Alys “Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border clashes claim nearly 100 lives,” BBC, 19 September 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62950787>

Tajik-Kyrgyz border.¹⁴ Externally, the Central Asian states have been expanding partnerships with different regional powers such as China, Türkiye, the United States, and Europe, especially via the frequency of “C5 Plus” formats that have been held over the past decade.¹⁵ As Dilnoza Ubaydullaeva elaborates, “the states in the region themselves have been conducting a so-called ‘multi-vector’ foreign policy, trying to make the most of the cooperation they have with various global players. Elevating the partnership with the EU might help the region better balance the influence of any single great power.”¹⁶

The value of the OSCE in facilitating regional engagement and strengthening defence relations

In practice, however, strengthening defence relations on a bilateral basis is more difficult than it may appear at first sight. The resources of European militaries are focused on the European continent, where key principles of the European security architecture and the liberal international order, such as the peaceful resolution of conflicts and the respect for international law, are threatened by the Russian Federation. Some European countries have also pledged a security commitment to the Indo-Pacific region. Dealing with these two theatres already stretches the capabilities of even Europe’s larger militaries dangerously thin. There is little hope that Europe could spare additional military resources for an engagement policy towards Central Asia. Other, more technical problems also complicate military-to-military relations. These include,

¹⁴ Turgunbaeva, Aigerim, “Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan Resolve Final Border Dispute: A Historic but Fragile Peace,” Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, 15 May 2025, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13868-kyrgyzstan-and-tajikistan-resolve-final-border-dispute-a-historic-but-fragile-peace.html>

¹⁵ Götz, Elias. “Near Abroad: Russia’s Role in Post-Soviet Eurasia,” pp. 1541-1542, Europe-Asia Studies, Vol. 74 No. 9 (2022), pp. 1529-1550; Schmidt, Friedrich and Wyssuwa, Matthias. “Der Krieg, das Öl und fünf neue Freunde,” Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 29 September 2023, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/zentralasien-gipfel-in-berlin-fuenf-neue-freunde-19210787.html>; Kakenova, Zarina. “U.S. Cooperation with Central Asian Countries within the C5+1 Initiative: Trends and Prospects” Journal of Central Asian Studies. March 2024. Vol. 93 No. 1, pp. 69-78; Akhmetkali, Aibarshyn. “Decade of C5+1: Experts Observe Advanced Regional Cooperation in Central Asia.” 28 August 2025. The Astana Times. <https://astanatimes.com/2025/08/decade-of-c51-experts-observe-advanced-regional-cooperation-in-central-asia/>. Eurasianet, “Uzbek president issues call for creation of “Central Asian Community,” 17 November 2025. <https://eurasianet.org/uzbek-president-issues-call-for-creation-of-central-asian-community>

¹⁶ Ubaydullaeva, Dilnoza. “What explains Europe’s interest in Central Asia,” Lowy Institute, 07 April 2025, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/what-explains-europe-s-interest-central-asia>

but are not limited to, the lack of foreign language skills sufficient to enable military interaction, various social aspects such as differences in the cost of living, problems associated with accommodation, different approaches to dealing with salaries and social benefits, and, most importantly, differences in the military culture between Europe and Central Asia. The militaries of the Central Asian states adhere mostly to Soviet military doctrines, and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are CSTO member states while Uzbekistan signed a defence cooperation treaty with Russia in 2017 and, in January 2025, adopted a military strategic partnership programme with the Russian Federation that is scheduled to last until 2030. European militaries, on the other hand, operate in accordance with NATO standards and are shaped by military cultures associated with the Global West. Consequently, much of the content and many of the procedures relevant to European militaries are of little value to officers from Central Asia and vice versa. The fifth Central Asian country, Turkmenistan, adheres to a policy of permanent neutrality which places strict limitations on Ashgabat's desire to engage in multilateral security cooperation.¹⁷ In brief, there are severe constraints on military cooperation between the Central Asian states and European countries.

In light of these and other obstacles that make bilateral defence cooperation difficult, the OSCE plays a valuable role as a common platform for cooperation. The OSCE offers great potential exactly because it is not (any longer)¹⁸ primarily military-oriented but is instead shaped by a comprehensive approach to security that includes extended security concepts and non-traditional security dimensions. On many occasions, German and European security interests can be better served by investing resources in the OSCE because the OSCE can carry out cooperative measures more effectively than national militaries could – for example, through the OSCE Academy in Bishkek or the Border Management Staff College in Dushanbe, the OSCE Programme Offices, or Mobile Training Teams in cooperation with partners from the United Nations. Furthermore, with regard to cooperation in the field of Small

¹⁷ Haas, Marcel de. "Security Policy and Developments in Central Asia: Security Documents Compared with Security Challenges," p. 223, *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 29 No. 2, 2016 pp. 203–226; The Moscow Times, "Russia and Uzbekistan Sign Military Strategic Partnership Plan," 22 January 2025, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/01/22/russia-and-uzbekistan-sign-military-strategic-partnership-plan-a87693>; Lt. Colonel Frank Weise, German Defence Attaché for Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan (2022-2025), interview with the author on 01 December 2025.

¹⁸ In its beginning, the OSCE Forum for Security Co-operation was primarily an instrument to solve military issues.

Arms & Light Weapons/Conventional Ammunition (SALW/CA) control, the OSCE goes beyond the UN to include other actors as well. The OSCE has, for example, worked together with regional organizations, like the South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC) and even NGOs to raise awareness about SALW/CA.¹⁹ In this context, the OSCE can assume the role of an important facilitator integrating regional expertise and local cultural understanding, and thus provide space to develop shared values. National militaries can and do contribute to these processes. But given the way in which military cooperation is designed, contributing is much easier than bearing the primary organizational responsibility for an entire cooperation project.²⁰ Despite all its shortfalls, the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine was an excellent example of co-operation in a military environment. It began as a civilian mission and only later developed to a mixed military mission to observe the implementation of the Minsk Agreement.

On a more abstract level, the strength of the OSCE lies in its various instruments, for example verification measures, OSCE assistance mechanism measures, extra-budgetary projects, or measures to reduce risks and increase transparency that can also be applied on a regional level or voluntary basis. These measures go beyond the realm of “high politics,” and the confrontation between the Russian Federation and the Global West which has exacerbated the organization’s paralysis, and thus could provide space for cooperation within OSCE mechanisms during a time when the organization’s role in European security policy and conflict mediation is limited by the external foreign policy environment.

Certainly, from a military perspective, the most important function the OSCE assumes is the topic of Confidence- and Security-Building Measures (CSBM) and, more precisely, verification of arms control. This is particularly significant at a time when important cornerstones of the Euro-Atlantic security and arms control architecture have suffered from abandonment and institutional paralysis. The Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty is considered moribund following the Russian Federation’s formal withdrawal and the subsequent suspension of participation by NATO member states in late 2023.²¹ Similarly, in

¹⁹ Authoritative, anonymous source, interview with the author on 17 February 2026.

²⁰ Lt. Colonel Frank Weise, German Defence Attaché for Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan (2022-2025), interview with the author on 01 December 2025.

²¹ NATO. “North Atlantic Council statement on the Allied response to Russia’s withdrawal from the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe,” 07 November 2023, <https://www.nato.int/>

November 2020 and January 2021, both the United States and Russia, respectively, withdrew from the Treaty on Open Skies.²² This leaves the OSCE's CSBM regime as the single most important, remaining element of multilateral security in the Euro-post-Soviet sphere.

Furthermore, and in addition to their principal value as a security mechanism, all matters related to CSBM and the verification of arms control regimes are particularly suitable instruments to strengthen security relations between Europe and Central Asia because they are mostly²³ an interstate affair. In the past, law enforcement assistance carried out under the auspices of the OSCE, for example, were the object of heavy criticism. As the political norms and values that shape the governance of OSCE participating states vary significantly across the organization, the work of the OSCE concerning the provision of international support to security sectors is hampered by conflicting mandates and interests.²⁴ In contrast to law enforcement, however, verification and confidence-building measures do not touch on internal government affairs and have little to do with political culture and societal values. As seen in the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, CSBMs have proven their ability to contribute to post-conflict resolution, especially directly after a peace agreement.

Nevertheless, similar to the overall geopolitical and security policy situation, the situation regarding verification and confidence-building measures is challenging. OSCE participating states have been unable to agree on the modernization of existing arms control instruments, and the security dimension of the OSCE has suffered administrative and institutional paralysis due to actions taken by some participating

[en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2023/11/07/north-atlantic-council-statement-on-the-allied-response-to-russias-withdrawal-from-the-treaty-on-conventional-armed-forces-in-europe](https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2023/11/07/north-atlantic-council-statement-on-the-allied-response-to-russias-withdrawal-from-the-treaty-on-conventional-armed-forces-in-europe)

²² U.S. Department of State, "United States Withdrawal from the Treaty on Open Skies," 06 July 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/united-states-withdrawal-from-the-treaty-on-open-skies/>; NATO, "Statement by the North Atlantic Council on the Treaty on Open Skies," 18 June 2021, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2021/06/18/statement>

Both the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty and the Treaty on Open Skies are legally binding but not OSCE treaties. Because they indirectly have a CSBM effect, they are mentioned in this context as well.

²³ SALW/CA deals with intrastate affairs.

²⁴ Friesendorf, Cornelius. "Supporting Democratic Policing in Central Asia: Limitations of the OSCE," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 74, No. 8 (2022): 1433–1458.

states²⁵ as decisions at the OSCE are adopted by consensus. This means that every decision or declaration can only be adopted if none of the 57 participating states objects to it. In light of the geopolitical situation briefly discussed at the beginning of this paper, the OSCE will foreseeably be unable to obtain new significant mandates and ministerial council decisions regarding collective security.²⁶ Simultaneously, full implementation of arms control verification suffers from the absence of a consequence mechanism for non-compliance – an issue that is of particular relevance with regard to efforts by European and North American government actors trying to engage with their Central Asian counterparts.

Having adopted the Vienna Document 2011 on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures as participating states of the OSCE, signatory states recognize that mutually complementary CSBMs serve to “strengthen confidence and security.”²⁷ This commitment, however, is a two-way-street. The commitment to the OSCE goes along with obligations, especially to consent to inspections and verification measures on a reciprocal basis, but also with opportunities to introduce measures into the verification regime.²⁸ For instance, Central Asian states could make greater use of inspection quotas and be more strongly represented among the inspection teams that are dispatched to military facilities in Europe to verify the information provided under the provisions within the Vienna Document. In addition, in some cases, there is still room to adjust national legislation to enable full participation in the verification and CSBM regime.²⁹ This is not to say that there have not been successful programmes under the aegis of the OSCE in Central Asia incorporating European, Central Asian, North American, and Caucasian partners. To name just four examples: in April 2024, Kyrgyz border guard officials completed a training course on the “Storage of Ammunition in an Ammunition Bunker Site” and in March 2025, technical specialists from the Kyrgyz Ministry of Defence completed a training course on propellant

²⁵ Vogel, Thomas. “Expertise: In troubled waters. The OSCE in times of war,” European Platform for Democratic Elections, 14 October 2024, <https://epde.org/?news=in-troubled-waters-the-osce-in-times-of-war>

²⁶ Authoritative, anonymous source, interview with the author on 04 December 2025.

²⁷ OSCE. “Vienna Document 2011: On Confidence- And Security-Building Measures,” 2, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/4/86597.pdf>

²⁸ Authoritative, anonymous source, interview with the author on 24 November 2025.

²⁹ Authoritative, anonymous source, interview with the author on 08 December 2025.

stability assessment. Both courses were aided by Austrian expertise.³⁰ In October 2025, the “Ammunition Storage and Surveillance Course,” which was organized by the OSCE and conducted by the German Bundeswehr Verification Centre and the British Joint Arms Control Implementation Group, was successfully concluded in Almaty, Kazakhstan.³¹

The “Mélange” project – a project to dispose of the highly toxic rocket fuel oxidizer mélange, which had been used in the Soviet era to propel short- and medium-range missiles – was carried out in various countries, including Kazakhstan, between 2002 and 2018. The removal of the chemical agent not only significantly contributed to the safety of the local population but addressed a severe environmental risk as well. In addition, the fact that the disposal of the chemical agents was carried out while a sanctions regime against Russian companies was in place proves the effectiveness of OSCE activities.³²

In line with the argument presented in this policy brief, as of 2025, there is still a lot of untapped potential for making greater use of the OSCE instruments that already exist, especially as far as extra-budgetary projects are concerned, since they are not affected by the consensus principle. This involves the interaction between states of Central Asia and Europe – in addition to North American and Caucasian states – but also intra-regional security dynamics. In addition to the necessity by signatory states to participate in the already existing verification framework, the CSBM under the OSCE framework include various instruments that could also be used on a regional level. Special bi/tri/multilateral arrangements, for example, may be utilised on a voluntary basis by signatory states to enable additional confidence-building measures to increase transparency.³³ What kind of special arrangements could be thought of?

³⁰ Omorova, Alima. “Safety First: OSCE enhances ammunition storage practices in the Kyrgyz Republic,” OSCE, 22 April 2024, <https://www.osce.org/programme-office-in-bishkek/567076>; Omorova, Alima. “Ministry of Defense of the Kyrgyz Republic advances ammunition stockpile management with OSCE support.” OSCE. 14 March 2025, <https://www.osce.org/programme-office-in-bishkek/587427>

³¹ OSCE. “OSCE and Kazakhstan Strengthen Ammunition Safety and Management Capacities.” 15 October 2025, <https://astana.osce.org/programme-office-in-astana/599589>

³² OSCE Forum for Security Co-operation, “The OSCE Mélange Project: Eliminating the Risk of Human and Environmental Disasters.” 31 May 2019. <https://www.osce.org/forum-for-security-cooperation/421433>; Authoritative, anonymous source, interview with the author on 17 February 2026.

³³ Authoritative, anonymous source, interview with the author on 24 November 2025.

Recommendations and concluding remarks

This policy brief aims to shed light on three examples that are of potential interest for confidence-building purposes. As mentioned above, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan concluded a peace deal in September 2022 and signed a landmark treaty in March 2025. One possible confidence-building measure under the auspices of the OSCE could focus on the management and security of small arms and light weapons.³⁴ OSCE field operations have been very active in the area of arms control, for example, with regard to improving the stockpile management of small arms and light weapons and their respective ammunition, as well as supporting national small arms control mechanisms as part of the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina.³⁵ Similar measures – in (sub) regional implementation – might support the peace-building process along the Tajik-Kyrgyz border.

Another topic of potential interest related to confidence-building measures concerns the use of nuclear power and ensuring its security and safety, particularly concerning the prevention of non-state actors acquiring nuclear materials in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1540.³⁶ As nuclear energy offers one solution to meet Central Asia's growing demand for electricity while simultaneously obviating the need for hydropower and reducing carbon emissions, three Central Asian states are turning towards or have shown an interest in nuclear power.³⁷ While the institution tasked with enlarging the "contribution of atomic energy to peace, health and prosperity throughout the world" and with verifying and monitoring nuclear non-proliferation is the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA),³⁸ in the past, the OSCE has

³⁴ Lt. Colonel Frank Weise, German Defence Attaché for Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan (2022-2025), interview with the author on 01 December 2025.

³⁵ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Arms Control, no date, <https://www.osce.org/arms-control>; Heider, Ulrich, "Military Aspects of the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina," in: IFSH (ed.), OSCE Yearbook 2009 (Baden-Baden 2010), pp. 167-177

³⁶ Lt. Colonel Frank Weise, German Defence Attaché for Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan (2022-2025), interview with the author on 01 December 2025; Authoritative, anonymous source, interview with the author on 17 February 2026.

³⁷ Jurayev, Sherzod and Waris Ali Khan, Muhammad. "Sustainable Political Foundations for Nuclear Energy Development in Central Asia," E3S web of conferences, 2024-01, Vol. 574, No. 01007, <https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202457401007>; Abuova, Nagima "Central Asia's Nuclear Future: Opportunities, Challenges and Geopolitics," 17 December 2024, The Astana Times, <https://astanatimes.com/2024/12/central-asias-nuclear-future-opportunities-challenges-and-geopolitics/>

³⁸ International Atomic Energy Agency, Statute, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/statute.pdf>

already worked in cooperation with the IAEA and facilitated dialogue on nuclear safety and security.³⁹

A third and currently very relevant topic that may also be of great interest to the Central Asian states is resilience. For years, the war in Ukraine has demonstrated the significance of a whole-of-society approach to defence.⁴⁰ Various European nations have shown a profound interest in total defence concepts.⁴¹ The OSCE has also begun to engage the topic. “How resilience helps societies respond to threats” was the focus of the OSCE Forum for Security Co-operation in October of this year.⁴² In November 2024, the OSCE Transnational Threats Department organised a regional conference on “Critical Infrastructure Protection in Central Asia: Strengthening Resilience, Enhancing Security” in Ashgabat for Central Asian government officials.⁴³ And Stefan Wolff has elaborated on the potential future role of the OSCE in strengthening resilience in Southeast Europe.⁴⁴

Given a very broad spectrum that includes many subtopics from critical infrastructure to national health, from civil defence and security in cyber space to food security, resilience against disinformation, and functioning civil administrations under conditions of conflict, there is

³⁹ OSCE, “798th Plenary Meeting of the Forum,” 30 September 2015, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/b/4/189141.pdf>

⁴⁰ Lux, Markus. “Munich Security Conference 2025: The Pivotal Role of Civil Society in Ukraine – in Wartime and Beyond.” Robert Bosch Stiftung, 10 February 2025, <https://www.bosch-stiftung.de/en/stories/pivotal-role-civil-society-ukraine-wartime-and-beyond>; Center for Strategic and International Studies. “Whole of Society Resilience Lessons from Russia-Ukraine | Conflict in Focus.” 17 April 2025. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/whole-society-resilience-lessons-russia-ukraine-conflict-focus>; Wright, Katharine A.M. “Realising Societal Resilience for a Whole of Society Approach to Defence.” RUSI, 14 October 2025, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/realising-societal-resilience-whole-society-approach-defence>

⁴¹ Wither, James Kenneth. “Back to the future? Nordic total defence concepts,” *Defence Studies*, 2020, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 61–81; Larsson, Sebastian. “Swedish total defence and the emergence of societal security,” in Larsson, Sebastian and Rhinard, Mark (eds.). *Nordic Societal Security: Convergence and Divergence* (London: Routledge 2021), pp. 45–67; Bartels, Hans-Peter. “Gesamtverteidigung: Annäherung an den Ernstfall.” DGAP Essay, No. 2 February 2025, https://dqap.org/system/files/article_pdfs/02-Essay_Gesamtverteidigung-online.pdf; Rongved, Gjermund Forfang. “Norwegian total defence concepts – approaching total defence 3.0?,” in: Rongved, Gjermund Forfang (ed.). *European Total Defence: Past, Present and Future* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2025), pp. 75–93.

⁴² OSCE, “Resilience’s contribution to comprehensive security focus of Forum for Security Co-operation meeting,” 14 October 2025, <https://www.osce.org/forum-for-security-cooperation/599316>

⁴³ OSCE, “OSCE fosters dialogue on critical infrastructure resilience in Central Asia and beyond,” 27 November 2024, <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/581707>

⁴⁴ Wolff, Stefan (2024). “The Role of the OSCE in Strengthening Resilience in Southeast Europe,” in: Predrag Jureković (ed.), *The War in Ukraine and Resilience in South East Europe - From Democratic Consolidation to Security* (Vienna: National Defence Academy): 121–138.

ample potential to set up projects, learn from each other, and exchange best practices as far as Europe and Central Asia are concerned.

In an increasingly volatile geopolitical environment, both European and Central Asian countries are confronted with great powers that assert their national interests in an ever more unilateral way. In this context, the OSCE can serve as a valuable platform to foster inter-regional relations but also to promote cohesion within Central Asia. Thus, while the organization as a facilitator for peace and stability at the grand scale appears to be hampered and paralysed by the current external policy environment, as far as confidence-building measures are concerned, OSCE measures continue to play an important role, with unused potential that can still be tapped into.

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