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OSCE FSC Security Dialogue
on Challenges of the New Generation Warfare of 12 May 2021

The OSCE's Potential to Reduce Uncertainty regarding the Military Use of Artificial Intelligence

Outline of Contribution by Tobias Vestner

The OSCE FSC Security Dialogue of 12 May 2021 addresses the challenges of the new generation of warfare. The guiding questions of the outline of the Chair of the FSC inquire about threat perceptions related to technological advances in the field of conventional weapons as well as avenues for ensuring internationally controlled management of new weapons and technologies. In particular, it asks if the OSCE would be well placed to regulate emerging weapons and technologies.

This contribution will focus on the arguably most significant paradigm-changing technology, namely artificial intelligence (AI). The contribution will argue that the OSCE's strengths are the exact response to the most salient challenge posed by AI. Indeed, the military use of AI as well as its impact on international and regional security is clouded with uncertainty. Compared to other international and regional organizations, the OSCE has the best tools to alleviate problems of uncertainty for its participating states.

At this stage, the only certainty regarding AI in security affairs is that states, in particular major military powers, are heavily investing in the development of military applications of AI. How states can and will use AI as well as the security implications thereof, however, remain unclear. Regarding the use of AI, there are intrinsic legal and ethical questions to be solved. Can AI be used in compliance with the international legal framework, in particular international humanitarian law? What levels of human control of AI are appropriate? Can unpredictable technologies be used, or must this issue first be solved at the technical level? Regarding the impact of AI on international and regional security, there are also many open questions. Will the advantages of AI be such that states without AI will simply not be able to defend themselves against those with AI? Will AI shorten time for decision-making such that political decision-makers will not have enough time for considering alternatives or de-escalation? Will AI technology without certain legal and ethical limitations have advantages over AI technology with such limitations?

While all these questions need further study and consideration, the OSCE provides - like no other international and regional organization - mechanisms to address related uncertainties to the benefit of its participating states. It is probable that states will first seek solutions to the legal and ethical questions at the national level before engaging in international regulatory initiatives. In this context, the OSCE can provide a forum for exchanging information and deliberation on national approaches, policies, and principles. In the absence of new regulations, the exchange of information can contribute to trust among OSCE participating states. Regarding the strategic impact of AI, it is hard to create confidence and security building measures (CSBM) without having a better sense of AI's effects on international and regional stability and security. Yet the OSCE can contribute to managing this uncertainty precisely by enabling discussions regarding for what tasks and under which conditions states use AI, how they integrate AI into military command structures, and what measures they undertake for ensuring human control of AI and the use of proper data, for instance. These are avenues for cooperation which add value to all OSCE participating states and its region, independently of regulations, or the absence thereof, at the global level.

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