



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
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Swiss Confederation

Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA

EEF.DEL/34/15
14 September 2015

ENGLISH only

Version 2.1

Keynote Statement by

Didier Burkhalter

**Head of the Swiss Federal
Department of Foreign Affairs**

23nd OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum

**“Swiss lines of action and OSCE avenues to
transform water from a source of conflict into an
instrument for peace”**

Prague, 14 September 2015

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Minister

Secretary General

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends

It is a great pleasure to return to Prague and participate again at the Economic and Environmental Forum of the OSCE. I appreciate the opportunity to address you today for two reasons:

First, Switzerland attaches great importance to the second dimension of the OSCE. We are committed to strengthening the economic and environmental field of cooperation, and this forum plays a major role in this.

Second, this year's conference issue of water & security figures highly on the Swiss foreign policy agenda. We consider water a strategic component of our efforts to advance peace and security. Establishing water as an OSCE issue is therefore an objective that we very much support.

During the OSCE Security Day on Water last year, His Royal Highness Prince El Hassan bin Talal of Jordan argued that – and I quote – “an absence of water is the biggest and most effective weapon of mass destruction” – end of quote. In a similar vein, this year's Global Risk Report of the World Economic Forum ranks water crises as the top global risk in terms of impact. The 900 decision-makers from the private and the public sector that were consulted for this report considered water crises to have a bigger potential impact than weapons of mass destruction and regional conflicts.

There is no doubt that water is an indispensable resource. Often, it is also related to major security risks. But water can also be – and this is my main message today – a powerful source of cooperation.

It is this notion of water as a driver for cooperation and development that is very much at the heart of Swiss water diplomacy. And it is this notion that

should guide us when discussing the role of the OSCE in the field of water & security.

Ladies and gentlemen

Water is essential for public health, food security, energy, and ecosystems. Today, this vital resource is facing unprecedented challenges.

Population growth, urbanization, a growing global middle class and changes in production and consumption patterns are directly impacting our water resources.

While the world population grew fourfold in the 20th century, freshwater withdrawals grew nine times. According to this year's World Water Development Report by the UN, global water demand is projected to increase by another 55% by 2030. The world is projected to face a 40% global water deficit if current trends continue.

Climate change adds to the water supply challenge by increasing the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events. Moreover, water resources are threatened by pollution. Millions of tons of sewage and sensitive waste are discharged every day directly into the world's aquatic ecosystems. This is impacting not only people's health. It is also causing immeasurable environmental degradation as well as economic loss.

Water is at the core of sustainable development. But water is not just a development issue. It is also a security issue. Competition over water can cause or fuel conflicts. Here, too, climate change exacerbates the risks of water-related conflicts, as it impacts on the variations in the distribution and availability of water resources.

Conflicts over water have already occurred in the Middle East, South Asia and other parts of the world. Water has even been used as a weapon of war, most notably in the Syrian conflict. In Syria, half of the production capacity of the country's water infrastructure has been lost as a result of war damage. On top of that, credible sources like the ICRC have documented numerous cases where water supplies for major cities such as Damascus or Aleppo have been cut deliberately by warring parties. Cutting water supplies has become a tactic of war to exert pressure on the other side. Such methods of warfare are a blatant violation of international humanitarian law.

Ladies and gentlemen

The challenges and risks associated with water are indisputable. Water security is one of the major issues to address – for us and the generations that follow. This is why it is so important that we engage to transform water from a source of crisis into an instrument for peace.

The potential for cooperation is evident. Let me illustrate this again with an example from the Syrian war – a context where we see much of the worst of what humans can do. In a watershed a few hundred km from Damascus, a huge irrigation scheme is occupied by opposing factions. There is fighting along various unstable front lines all over the irrigation fields. Remarkably, what we are observing in this particular case is that opponents who are fighting during daylight, sit together and negotiate a fair quota of water in the evening – with priority given to human consumption, domestic use and subsistence agriculture in the entire irrigation fields.

This is of course not a role model of how we envisage water cooperation. But the Syria example indicates that cooperative water solutions can be found even in the most difficult of circumstances.

It is this belief in the power of water cooperation that has guided Switzerland throughout the four decades of our engagement in the field of water. It is the same belief that has prompted us recently to develop lines of action on “water & security”.

These lines of action provide a compass to the work of the Swiss foreign ministry in the field of water & security. But these lines of action are also meant to inspire others to work on water & security, which is why we will publish them today.

Our lines of action make the case for a comprehensive approach when addressing the nexus of water & security. Rendering water an effective source of cooperation and security requires a broad toolbox, ranging from instruments of development cooperation and humanitarian aid to peace promotion and international law. The lines of action also sketch the bilateral and regional avenues in our work on water & security, and they outline how we work in multilateral processes and with the private sector to achieve the best possible results.

Since 2009, Switzerland has been engaged in so-called “Blue Diplomacy”. Our engagement in water diplomacy relies on the long-standing experience and expertise Switzerland has in transboundary water cooperation, for instance in the Rhine basin, one of the most important cultural and economic axes in Europe.

We have become particularly active in the development of new mechanisms for water-policy negotiation and coordination in order to promote diplomacy over surface water and groundwater in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. For instance, we are supporting efforts to strengthen good governance and management mechanisms in seventeen transboundary river basins worldwide, including in the wider Middle East.

In Central Asia, the integrated and sustainable management of water resources is key for development, peace and security. Switzerland is

supporting several countries in the introduction of an Integrated Water Management approach, implementing pilot basin management examples and a comprehensive policy dialogue with the partners in the concerned ministries.

Following the request of five countries in the Central Asian region, Switzerland has also launched a hydro-diplomatic initiative. We appointed a special envoy for water in order to facilitate interstate dialogue and to contribute to the building of a regional vision and management mechanism of water-related challenges. After consultations by the Special Envoy and a visit I made to the region last year, the five Central Asian countries met in Basel to exchange views on regional water cooperation. A next meeting will take place early next year.

As for our most recent initiative, Switzerland will launch, together with partner States, a Global High Level Panel on Water and Peace in Geneva this November. The task of this panel will be to develop a set of proposals aimed at strengthening the global architecture to prevent and resolve water-related conflicts and to facilitate the use of water for building peace.

While independent, the Panel will work closely with the United Nations. UN-Water has accepted to become an observer. The Panel will build on Switzerland's experience as well as on the wealth of actors in International Geneva who work on water-related issues. The Panel will be able to make full use of Geneva as an international hub for water diplomacy.

This finally brings me to the question of OSCE engagement in the field of water & security. Strengthening the OSCE's portfolio in water diplomacy and sustainable water management, in particular in relation to conflict prevention and confidence building, has been a joint priority of the consecutive Swiss and Serbian chairs.

The OSCE area features more than 150 river and lake basins that are shared by two or more States. The OSCE has built a strong track record on supporting participating States in fostering good and joint water governance. More can and should be done.

Why does Switzerland consider the OSCE a vital actor and multiplier in water governance? Three reasons:

First, OSCE know-how in cooperative security and its comprehensive approach linking the environment and security are of great value when it comes to water governance. The OSCE can act as a facilitator and political platform, as was the case when legal frameworks for water governance between Ukraine and Moldova and between Kirgizstan and Kazakhstan were worked out.

The OSCE can also bring in its own expertise. For example, two months ago, there was an OSCE regional training workshop in Almaty on gender mainstreaming and conflict resolution in Central Asia's water governance, financed by Switzerland, Finland, and Norway.

Second, the OSCE has partnerships with other institutions that have in-depth knowledge in water governance, such as the UN Economic Commission for Europe. Many water-related projects of the OSCE take place within the Geneva-based Environment and Security Initiative. Through this initiative, the OSCE and five partner organisations seek to transform shared environmental risks into opportunities for cooperation.

A recent example is the trans-boundary climate change adaptation strategy that Ukraine and Moldova endorsed this year in the context of their bilateral cooperation treaty regarding the Dniester basin. This strategy is the work of experts that was facilitated by the OSCE and UNECE. Switzerland encourages more such joint initiatives to follow.

The third and final reason why we see an important role for OSCE in water & security is that this organisation is close to the people and has a strong presence on the ground. The OSCE works with civil society. And many of its field missions have played important roles in promoting water cooperation.

Let me recall the efforts by the OSCE Office in Tajikistan to facilitate transboundary water cooperation between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Another example are the roundtable discussions, organized by the OSCE presence in Albania and OSCE headquarters, on how Aarhus Centres could foster public participation in trans-boundary water management in the South Eastern Europe region. Switzerland regards the almost 60 OSCE-supported Aarhus Centres in 14 participating States as useful platforms to engage citizens, governments and the private sector in a dialogue on environmental challenges.

I also wish to commend the OSCE for its efforts to mitigate the serious water supply crisis in the conflict-affected regions in Ukraine. By facilitating dialogue and local ceasefires, the SMM has been essential in enabling the repairs of damaged water supply infrastructure. The humanitarian and economic Working Groups of the Trilateral Contact Group have played an important role too in helping restore water infrastructure across the conflict region.

Switzerland has complemented these OSCE efforts with bilateral assistance to improving access to drinking water in Ukraine by delivering chemicals for water treatment. My country has been the first (and the only one so far) to send humanitarian convoys across the Contact Line. Another convoy is in the making. All these measures to improve access to water across the Contact Line, whether by the OSCE or Switzerland, are to the benefit of the people and help rebuild confidence between the parties to the conflict.

Ladies and gentlemen

The OSCE can address water holistically – from disaster risk reduction to water diplomacy. This is very much in line with Switzerland's approach to water and security. We encourage participating States to support the OSCE efforts to foster security through cooperative water governance. And we look forward to working with the Serbian Chairmanship and all of you in promoting water as an OSCE issue on the concrete road to the Belgrade Ministerial Council and on our common road to peace and security.