

# TOWARDS EFFICIENT EARLY ACTION 113

THE EU NEEDS A REGIONAL FOCUS AND PROACTIVE TOOLS TO PREVENT AND MANAGE CONFLICTS

Tanja Tamminen

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THE EU NEEDS A REGIONAL FOCUS AND PROACTIVE TOOLS  
TO PREVENT AND MANAGE CONFLICTS



Tanja Tamminen  
Researcher  
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

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- The Lisbon Treaty and the European External Action Service provide the EU with an excellent framework for comprehensive and effective crisis prevention and crisis management work. They just need to be utilised to the full.
- The security and development nexus can only be enhanced through long-term perspectives.
- Rather than renewing its general security strategy, the EU's focus should be on preparing tailor-made and institutionally endorsed regional approaches and strategies, where the broad objectives would be operationalized into more concrete goals.
- In conflict-prone regions, goal-setting should be carried out through full participation with the beneficiary countries and their civil societies.
- Dialogue and mediation are perfect tools for achieving reconciliation and stability, and need to be utilized at every stage of comprehensive crisis management and at different levels of society.
- Comprehensive EU activities in the field of crisis prevention and crisis management should be duly evaluated, as only by looking at the bigger picture can lessons truly be learned and endorsed.

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High Representative Catherine Ashton visited a vessel participating in the EU Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) operation Atalanta on the coast of Mombasa, Kenya in August, 2012. Photo: European Union.

After over a year of bloody conflict, the civil war in Syria shows no sign of abating. The non-action and disunity of the international community have been strongly criticized by many who, during recent years, had hailed the paradigms of *human security* and *responsibility to protect*, which emphasised the moral duty of the international community to stop violence to protect human lives. The inability to act efficiently to prevent such a violent crisis from escalating and the difficulties of reaching any tangible results through the UN/Arab League-led mediation process have tragically shown the limits of the conflict prevention and conflict management policies of the international community.

Given that the European Union is suffering a grave economic crisis, this also seems to have weakened its appetite for constructive leadership. Yet, the Lisbon Treaty that entered into force in 2009 created structures for more coherent foreign policy. It established the European External Action Service (EEAS). The Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, steers the Common Foreign and Security Policy, leads the EEAS and is at the same time Vice President of the Commission. This new structure lowers the institutional barriers and should overcome the old incoherencies of the many EU foreign policy institutions and strategies. The Union may clearly and unanimously condemn the violence in Syria, but have the new structures made the EU a stronger actor in the field of conflict prevention and peace-building?

The young EEAS faces a number of challenges in planning and implementing the EU's comprehensive crisis management and in steering it towards early action. What would the EU require to act faster, more efficiently and in a proactive manner to prevent violent conflicts or their escalation? This paper argues that the EU needs to endorse more regional strategies based on specific needs assessment and conflict analysis. In the framework of such strategies, the EU can more proactively deploy new tools such as peace mediation, for instance, which up to now has been an underrated EU activity.

### **Towards proactive conflict prevention**

Since its conception, the EEAS has come in for major criticism over its lack of strategic vision. High Representative Catherine Ashton is steering the Common Security and Foreign Policy towards a more tactical way of thinking. The EU's crisis management missions are to be self-assessed in the future with a set of benchmarks that result in exit strategies built on clear end-state logic. Past experience has shown that without unambiguous operational objectives that are actually achievable, the civilian missions and military operations tend to be extended without a shared understanding of when the right time to leave would be. Now, European crisis management is to be rendered more "coherent and efficient" if one listens to the political rhetoric and reads the Council conclusions.

The reality on the ground still leaves a lot to be desired, however. The differentiated reactions of EU member states to the Libyan crisis showed the lack of a united foreign policy line when it comes to military intervention. The inability to prevent the Syrian civil war from escalating has brought back gloomy memories from the dark days of the early 1990s when the EU was unable to act in a united manner to stop the atrocities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The genocide that took place right under the noses of the Dutch UN peacekeepers in Srebrenica marks a lamentable chapter in the history of the European Union, which was duly characterized as a “political dwarf” during the Bosnian war.

It was in the aftermath of the Kosovo war in 1999 that the European Security and Defence Policy was created – known today as the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). In June 2011, the Foreign Affairs Council reiterated that “preventing conflicts and relapses into conflict is a primary objective of the EU’s external action” and enumerated a number of ways in which the EU can strengthen its preventive action. “One form of early action is mediation,” the Council noted. These Council conclusions clearly reflected the willingness of the member states to develop the EU’s capacities “in the field of long-term structural conflict prevention to complement shorter-term crisis management and peace support operations”.<sup>1</sup>

However, the official speech is littered with vague concepts that everyone agrees upon: peace and stability, comprehensive action, cooperation and coordination. The EEAS is facing the challenge of how to operationalize these concepts to actually make a difference on the ground – where it matters the most.

The ten EU Special Representatives currently deployed in some instable regions such as the Horn of Africa, Sudan and South Sudan, Afghanistan and the Middle East have to find concrete ways in their everyday work to support fragile peace processes and prevent relapses into violence. The precarious situation in Libya demonstrates the need for precaution and long-term strategies that take into account the complexity of (post-)conflict situations.

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1 FAC conclusions 20 June 2011.

## From comprehensive crisis management to early action

The International Community or “a coalition of the willing” may agree to intervene in a conflict, but is often criticized for its non-coordinated action in post-intervention activities. Even the EU actors have not always been able to reach consensus on joint objectives and strategies on the ground. In some places like Kosovo, where a multitude of international actors have been present since the 1999 war, the local political leaders have had difficulties identifying the EU policy when EU Commission-paid consultants, the CSDP operation monitors and the EUSR office have all been dispensing advice on local legislation, for example.

The definitions of comprehensive crisis management vary from a simple understanding of a need to promote synergies between civil and military actors to a larger understanding of the need for coordination and joint efforts between all actors in crisis areas including the development agencies. Many agree that the ideal situation would be where the best tools are used in a comprehensive manner to achieve a certain objective – thus each actor needed has a specific role to play and there is neither overlapping nor gaps in the action.

Even though the ideal situation may never be reached, the Lisbon Treaty, the EEAS and the strengthened role of the EU delegations already make the coordination smoother. This can clearly be seen in Kosovo and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, where the EU has long been a major donor (through the Commission) but the EUSR has had the political voice. Now the EUSRs are also double-hatted as the Heads of the EU delegations, which eliminates the uncomfortable dualism and strengthens the EU’s leverage.

In any conflict-prone area, when early warning signs are detected by the EU delegations on the ground (or by member states represented by their embassies or international partners), a political decision-making process should be quickly initiated on how to react and on which tools to use – all within a larger strategic framework. The EU has lacked a proactive stance on smouldering conflict zones but this should change in the future, especially as High Representative Catherine Ashton has noted that the EEAS’s main role is crisis prevention. The institutional changes made in the EEAS this



The gravestones at the Srebrenica genocide memorial serve as a reminder of the EU's inability to prevent war crimes in Europe at the end of the 20th century. Photo: Michael Bükér / Wikimedia Commons.

spring show the willingness to move towards this objective: The structures that plan and manage crisis management operations and the divisions that deal with security policy and conflict prevention all now belong to the crisis management structures (unlike in the earlier versions of the EEAS organogram where they were institutionally separated).

The main pragmatic objective of comprehensive crisis management thinking is to identify the most effective and tailor-made toolbox for each crisis situation. Early action in a crisis requires a holistic use of the tools at hand from early warning to mediation. Moreover, these initial actions and analysis need to be clearly linked with the eventual planning of a military intervention or a civilian crisis management mission.

An evaluation of the European Commission activities<sup>2</sup> shows us that the Commission's role in providing financial support to conflict prevention and peace-building should not be neglected. The Commission has intervened in conflict areas using both long-term development measures as well as short-term instruments such as political dialogue, high-level mediation and the deployment of EU observers. The cooperation between the EEAS and the Commission could be strengthened even further

if there was a more genuine will to create pragmatic partnerships between the institutions to identify complementarities and prevent disputes on competence matters. According to the evaluation, the Commission reacted quickly to conflicts but there were shortcomings when it comes to the transition to long-term prevention. In the post-Lisbon Treaty era, the coherence and effectiveness of the EU's approach can be enhanced. Indeed, EU institutions should be on the same page when it comes to shared strategies.

#### Tailor-made approaches to conflict areas

Each crisis is *sui generis* and happens in a regional context. When Mary Kaldor and her Human Security Study Group proposed a Human Security Doctrine for Europe for the first time in 2001, one of the principles they brought up was the regional focus. Conflicts do not happen in a vacuum even though the international responses often tend to be blindfolded, focusing on one state or area only.

In their Barcelona Report Kaldor and the group used the Balkans as an example to illustrate the fact that "time and again, foreign policy analysts have been taken by surprise when, after considerable attention had been given to one conflict, another conflict would seemingly spring up out of the blue in a neighbouring state". Kosovo's drastic human rights situation was not taken up during the Dayton

2 Thematic Evaluation of European Commission Support to Conflict Prevention and Peace-building 2001- 2010, Final Report, October 2011, prepared by ADE.

negotiations over Bosnia-Herzegovina. Only a couple of years later, violence erupted in Kosovo. The situation of the Albanians in the neighbouring areas such as Macedonia or Southern-Serbia was not tackled, so there was still mature ground for violent clashes after the Kosovo war was settled in 1999. According to Kaldor and her Study Group, “A continuous regional focus could instead allow successful practices to spread quickly from one locality to the next”.<sup>3</sup>

The *Human Security Doctrine for Europe* may never have been endorsed by the EU and the concept of human security may have remained part of the vocabulary of only a few, but these ideas have steered the discussions on EU security and defence policies. The EU has adopted many of the issues pointed out in the Doctrine in its CSDP activities. The EU has also started to prepare regional strategies. In their 2011 *World Development Report* the World Bank noted the need for “a layered approach”. “Some problems can be addressed at the country level, but others need to be addressed at a regional level, such as developing markets that integrate insecure areas and pooling resources for building capacity.”<sup>4</sup>

To fully embrace the regional focus, the EEAS should find ways of strengthening the dialogue between the regional expertise, conflict prevention and the crisis management field. Indeed, no crisis is an island and the Arab spring is a painful reminder of how the international community often still tries to put out a fire in one place, without noticing the smouldering fires in many other places. The conflict in Syria is now spilling over to Lebanon. One can justifiably ask whether something could have been done better to avoid the horrors of the Syrian civil war, and whether stronger early action could have made a difference.

The EU has developed two regional strategies for specific conflict areas: the Horn of Africa and the Sahel area (2011). Both strategies are often quoted as examples of comprehensive EU action, where both development aid and crisis management efforts are

being jointly coordinated. None of these strategies fully reflects the possibilities of truly comprehensive crisis management and proactive crisis prevention, however. The strategy on the Sahel seems to overlook the possibilities of preventing conflict escalation in Mali, for example.

Recently, discussions have started on whether the EU should renew its Security Strategy from 2003 (updated in 2008). Rather than renewing a strategy full of generic objectives and high-level conceptualisations, the EU should focus on writing and agreeing upon pragmatic regional strategies, where the high-level objectives, such as world peace and stability, would be operationalized into more concrete goals. These kinds of strategies would create a frame whereby all the EU tools from diplomacy, development aid and financial support to peace mediation, dialogue facilitation and all the CSDP instruments would be balanced and the best tools chosen to strive towards joint objectives.

Such a strategic frame would serve all the EU actors and EU member states when planning future action rather than an updated general security strategy. Regional strategies should be made easy to update depending on the changes on the ground, as the agility to use the best tools in the right place and at the right moment is the key to effective conflict prevention.

### **Can there be peace and security without reconciliation efforts?**

The two existing strategies can serve as sources of lessons to be learned. *The EU Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel* notes that security and development cannot be separated, and that helping these countries achieve security is integral to enabling their economies to grow and poverty to be reduced. It promotes regional cooperation, capacity-building and economic development, but also pays considerable attention to the fight against terrorism, trafficking and corruption, for example. Despite a number of human conflicts in the region, of which the one in Mali is the most notorious perhaps, the strategy does not mention prospects for mediation, dialogue or confidence-building measures.

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3 A Human Security Doctrine for Europe: The Barcelona Report of the Study Group on Europe’s Security Capabilities, p. 15.

4 The World Bank’s *World Development Report 2011 on Conflict, Security and Development*, p. xii.

The EU strategy towards the Horn of Africa (Sudan, including Darfur, South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea) is a wider framework of action, as the EU understands the need for “working with the region itself and with international partners to tackle the underlying causes of conflict” and “to support local, regional or international mediation efforts to resolve ongoing conflicts”. It takes better into account the EU contribution to conflict resolution and prevention. One reason for the discrepancy between the two strategies is that the conflicts are much better known in this region than in the Sahel area. The shortcomings of the Sahel strategy demonstrate the inability of the EU to detect early warning signs. The most recent and best mediatized Tuareg rebellion took place this year less than a year after the strategy was decided.

It is important for the EU to take steps towards more proactive policies and to recognize the importance of conflict prevention and mediation as a tool in this field. Yet, mediation and dialogue facilitation are tools that can be used all the way from the conflict prevention phase to early action logic and the processes of crisis management itself. Thus, mediation should not be understood merely as a tool that is used as one single intervention in a sequence of interventions using different conflict management instruments. Mediation and dialogue are long processes that can be used to identify, and help in adopting, ways to solve problems through peaceful means in any given society or conflict area.

In the new EEAS structures, the Mediation Support Team (Division for Conflict Prevention, Peace-Building and Mediation) is now placed in the crisis management structures. This may slowly change the old mindsets to see that reconciliation cannot be achieved only through traditional crisis management tools such as military intervention or by mentoring the police forces. It requires dialogue and mediation, fields where EU capacities can be further strengthened.

### **Whose objectives for crisis management?**

In a region-specific strategic framework, different EU instruments can be engaged in view of long-term objectives. But this begs the question of whose objectives we are talking about. One of the guiding principles in EU crisis management has been the

local ownership and local responsibility to implement reforms. However, if the required reforms are based on objectives defined by outsiders, one cannot talk about genuine local ownership.

The Council of the EU has often underlined the need for “systematically carrying out security/conflict sensitive assessments and conflict analysis, where appropriate, in the preparation of country and regional strategies and programmes – engaging in in-depth consultations, strategic political and conflict analyses and screenings with a view to planning and acting consistently on early signs of tension, instability and fragility”.<sup>5</sup>

Still, the strategic priorities of the EU itself seem to steer its work in the conflict areas. The EU fosters themes such as the rule of law, security sector reform, the fight against organized crime, border management and reform of the judiciary as the main goals of civilian crisis management. David Chandler points out that they are very technocratic goals – technical solutions are proposed for political problems (i.e. conflict). According to Chandler, the EU denies its political responsibility for the development on the ground<sup>6</sup>. Looking at the main objectives, they can actually be seen as quite self-interest-based: the EU protecting its own security by promoting peace, stability and the rule of law. The Sahel strategy mentions it openly: “the EU has an important role to play both in encouraging economic development for the people of the Sahel and helping them achieve a more secure environment in which it can take place, and in which the interests of EU citizens are also protected.”

This year, many EU member states have endorsed the “New Deal” document elaborated by leaders of the g7+ countries, a group of fragile states, to bring a local voice into the founding principles of peace-building and state-building policies. Thus, these EU states have committed themselves “to support inclusive country-led and country-owned transitions out of fragility based on a country-led fragility assessment”, and to support inclusive and participatory political dialogue. The document

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5 See GAERC Conclusions on Security and Development, 19 November 2007.

6 cf. David Chandler, *Empire in Denial: The Politics of State-Building*. Pluto Press 2006.

further notes that the signatories “recognise that an engaged public and civil society, which constructively monitors decision-making, is important to ensure accountability”. Indeed, the objectives of any peace-building and state-building policies should arise from local needs; otherwise the results cannot be sustainable.

The EU delegations present in the region are in a key position to listen to local needs. Mission planning should also be participatory and start from the local needs perspective, not from the so often institutional mindset (i.e. what capacities do we have, what could we deploy). Strengthening local rule of law institutions is probably on the local need list in a conflict-prone region, but the EU could benefit from more human interest-focused planning. Human rights issues, women and children, are themes often neglected or undermined when basing EU crisis management on more hard core values such as combating crime.

### **The need for impact assessment**

Conflict situations are always complex. How can the EU know whether it is “doing the right thing”? One of the findings of the World Bank’s widely praised *World Development Report 2011 on Conflict, Security and Development*, which the World Bank is also incorporating in its approaches to conflict areas, is that the activities in conflict (-prone) areas necessarily require more risk-taking. Peace-building should not be seen as a linear development from war to peace, and the international actors should be fully aware of and accept the highly probable setbacks. Clear results should only be expected in a long time frame.

As Robert B. Zoellick, President of the World Bank, puts it: “International agencies and partners from other countries must adapt procedures so they can respond with agility and speed, a longer-term perspective, and greater staying power. Assistance needs to be integrated and coordinated... – And we need to accept a higher level of risk: If legislatures and inspectors expect only the upside, and just pillory the failures, institutions will steer away from the most difficult problems and strangle themselves with procedures and committees to avoid responsibility.”

The European Union is a major actor in the peace-building field, but it is also a “normative power”, it does “norm enforcement” (as Cedric de Coning has put it). It is often easy, but from a long-term perspective risky, to create benchmarking systems of crisis management based on short-term institutional reforms. Genuine rule of law cannot be measured in the number of EU-compatible laws, action plans and administrative guidelines that have been adopted under the supervisory eye of EU monitors. The main thing is implementation, which is much more difficult to measure. As the President of the World Bank notes, it is often easy to hide behind working groups and steering committees to discuss further strategies, rather than following through with the reforms in society.

CSDP missions are by definition relatively short-term interventions and as their mandates are agreed for a maximum of 2 years at a time, very often their objectives are in a quite short time frame, compared to the needs of the conflict transformation. There seems to be an expectation among EU members that there would be genuine development to be measured, for instance when it comes to the rule of law in a given post-conflict area, after the monitoring and mentoring efforts of EU experts during a couple of years. The presumption is that only the right benchmarking and reporting tools need to be introduced to get the big picture. This attitude may, however, be slowly changing.

Self-assessment and transparent reporting from the missions and operations are indeed necessary tools to steer the work of the EU and flexibly change the priorities and instruments if needed. However, they should not be taken as tools to measure the impact of the EU strategies as a whole. EU peace-building efforts should be long-term and strategic, even though different tools can be used along the way, starting from short-term military and/or civilian interventions to development aid-type projects, and supervision and mentoring by the European delegations that stay in the regions even after the CSDP personnel have left. The closing down of the EU Police Mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the transfer of some of its rule of law support activities to the EUSR office and to the EU delegation-led Commission-financed projects is a good example of the implementation of this new strategic mindset. EU development aid programming calls for conflict

sensitivity and can be used with the aim of preventing future relapses into violence.

To evaluate EU activities, more comprehensive impact evaluation tools will be required. External evaluation has been a central tool in the field of development aid for a long time already. Thus, Commission activities can be evaluated by outside experts, whereas the member-state-driven CSDP is still a no-go zone for external evaluators. The current economic crisis may lead to a situation where the European Parliament, as well as the parliaments in the EU member states, will start asking questions about the CSDP budget use and “value for money”. To provide plausible and transparent information on the impact of crisis management activities, the member states may sooner or later need to comply with the demands of external evaluation. This will only serve to reinforce the efficiency of the EU activities.

## Conclusions

The European External Action Service has been running for over a year. The Common Security and Defence Policy has a tangible track record. In June 2012 the first EU civilian crisis management mission (EUPM Bosnia-Herzegovina) was shut down and three new CSDP missions (all in Africa) were launched. The EEAS has been developing new ways of assessing its activities in the CSDP field by collecting lessons learned, writing strategic reviews and using newly designed benchmarks to measure the achievements of the CSDP missions. The Commission has ordered an evaluation of its peace-building activities between 2001 and 2010. The EU clearly wants to learn and strive towards more efficient activities.

However, the EU member states do not allow the external evaluation of CSDP missions. Whether carried out by external experts or internally, to assess

the results of CSDP missions and conflict-prevention policies, the EU needs clearly defined goals. Yet, the objectives of the EU activities in fragile states and post-conflict situations are still too often based on EU internal decision-making processes, rather than truly reflecting a consultative dialogue with the local stakeholders.

The EU should prepare more regional strategies, tailored to the specificities of a (possibly) conflict-prone region and bringing together both EU development aid and crisis management objectives. They need to be inclusive; the objectives for the EU action must be identified through dialogue and by listening to the local counterparts and beneficiaries. Until now, the EU has not fully utilised its mediation capacities. From now on, dialogue and mediation should be incorporated throughout the long-term peace processes that the EU can support in the framework of such regional strategies.

The Finnish Institute of International Affairs  
tel. +358 9 432 7000  
fax. +358 9 432 7799  
www.fiiia.fi

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