

# THE EU'S EXTERNAL CONFLICT RESPONSES

DRIVERS AND EMERGING TRENDS IN THE ERA OF  
STRATEGIC COMPETITION

**Katariina Mustasilta**

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## DRIVERS AND EMERGING TRENDS IN THE ERA OF STRATEGIC COMPETITION

The EU's conflict and crisis responses face an ever more challenging environment, characterized by two interconnected aspects: increasingly complex conflict and security situations, as well as intensifying rivalry among major powers in a shifting international order. In the era of strategic competition, conflicts and crises offer venues for competing powers to gain influence and pursue their preferred world order.

This Working Paper discusses the key external and internal drivers that influence the EU's conflict and crisis responses and identifies three emerging trends that follow on from this: there is an increasing emphasis on geopolitical rationales in decision-making regarding where and what actions to take; responses take the form of security-oriented and narrowly defined operations that are largely non-executive and supportive in nature; and there is a growing demand for ad hoc frameworks and flexibility in conflict responses.



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# THE EU'S EXTERNAL CONFLICT RESPONSES

## DRIVERS AND EMERGING TRENDS IN THE ERA OF STRATEGIC COMPETITION

### INTRODUCTION

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has shattered the European security architecture, put interstate wars back on the political agenda, and catalyzed movement in several EU member states' strategic cultures.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the war, a record number of armed conflicts worldwide is challenging existing conflict prevention and crisis management policies. After 20 years of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions, development of mediation support, conflict early warning, and peacebuilding tools, the EU finds itself in a changed world and under evolving pressures to respond to it.<sup>2</sup>

Against this background, this Working Paper examines the key external and internal drivers influencing the EU's conflict and crisis responses<sup>3</sup> in the era of strategic competition.<sup>4</sup> The paper discusses three external factors that are intensified by the deepening strategic competition in conflict and crisis situations, and in responding to them: an increasing number of actors involved in conflict and crisis situations; growing competition in the fields of conflict management and resolution; and increasing contestation over (democratic) governance models and ideals.<sup>5</sup> In the case of the EU's conflict responses, these external factors are intertwined with the effects of two internal factors regarding the EU's role as a conflict responder: lessons from past responses and the EU's general evolution as a foreign policy actor.

Taken together, these external and internal drivers influence the EU's overall approach to external conflicts and crises. The paper identifies and discusses three trends that follow on from this: the increasing emphasis on geopolitical rationales in EU decision-making

regarding conflict responses; moving towards more security-oriented and narrowly defined responses that are "hands-off", that is, largely non-executive and supportive in nature; and the growing demand for ad hoc frameworks and flexibility in EU conflict responses. While these trends are not entirely new, they are particularly relevant in the era of strategic competition and can have considerable implications for the EU's role in conflicts and crises.

### 1. A CHANGING STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT FOR CONFLICT RESPONSES

There are two interdependent characteristics that shape the shifting strategic environment. First, the global conflict environment is more crowded and intense than in decades, including in areas of strategic importance to the EU: 2022 was the deadliest year for armed conflicts since 1994 and the Rwandan genocide, due to two highly intense wars – Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the conflict in Ethiopia between the government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).<sup>6</sup> Whilst Russia's war of aggression absorbed most of the EU's and the public's attention in Europe, other strategically important regions, such as the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, continue to struggle with violent conflicts and political instability.<sup>7</sup>

In general, conflicts are marked by increasing complexity, for lack of a better term. They consist of more numerous and diverse conflict parties (see section 1.1), means and platforms, and are influenced by global threats to peace and security.<sup>8</sup> The world is facing several inter-connected global challenges, such as climate change and biodiversity loss, geoeconomic competition, a cost of living crisis (influenced by the repercussions of the pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war), and growing inequalities (including technological ones).<sup>9</sup> This polycrisis environment renders conflict prevention, management, and resolution increasingly challenging.

1 See Helwig 2023. Strategic culture refers to historically constructed norms and practices, experiences, and threat perceptions regarding the use of (military) force that enable and constrain a political community's behaviour in security and defence. Sudden shocks, such as the onset of the full-scale war in Europe, can induce shifts in strategic cultures.

2 For past and ongoing CSDP missions, see EEAS 2023a.

3 Conflict and crisis responses refer here to the EU's engagement in situations of violent conflict escalation, the threat of escalation, as well as escalated security and political crises outside the EU borders.

4 This paper uses the term strategic competition to describe the deepening rivalry between major powers in the international system. The term major power refers to global powers (e.g., the United States, China) and regional or middle powers that have aspirations to strengthen their international power. See Lee and Thompson 2017.

5 The increasing complexity of conflicts and the changing landscape of international peacebuilding efforts have been widely discussed before, also in connection to great power competition. See e.g., de Coning 2020 and Karjalainen 2020.

6 Davies, Pettersson and Öberg 2023.

7 Ibid; see also the German national security strategy 2023 (Federal Government of Germany 2023).

8 See UN Secretary General New Agenda for Peace 2023; Mustasilta 2021.

9 See e.g., Torkington 2023.

Second, the environment of heightened strategic competition among major powers and other international actors complicates conflict situations and puts pressure on the EU's responses to them. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has accelerated the trend of deepening geopolitical competition amid the shifting international order.<sup>10</sup> Rather than a strictly bipolar rivalry between the great power blocs – the United States and Europe being challenged by China and Russia – the shifting order is characterized by multiple actors that strive to strengthen their international position and autonomy. Many states in the so-called Global South see the geopolitical transition as a potentially positive development that could bring about a fairer international system.<sup>11</sup> They remain reluctant to choose between the global power blocs in the systemic rivalry, preferring to build issue-based and flexible partnerships according to their own rationales.<sup>12</sup> This poses new challenges for the EU regarding the frameworks and norms for strategic partnerships and interaction in the international system in general, and particularly concerning already challenging conflict and crisis situations.

### 1.1. Complex conflicts with multiple stakeholders

Not only is the number of conflicts at a worrisome level, but there are more stakeholders to consider. The last decade witnessed a substantial proliferation of non-state armed groups fighting state actors, each other, and civilians across conflict contexts.<sup>13</sup> In 2022, there were 82 non-state conflicts recorded globally. This included several conflict dyads between IS-affiliated and al Qaida-affiliated groups in the Sahel, conflicts between drug cartels in Latin America, and multiple escalated communal conflicts between farmer and herder communities, for example.<sup>14</sup>

Many EU crisis management operations take place in contexts shaped by a multitude of non-state armed groups. The presence and influence of such groups challenge the dominant conflict management approaches that are geared towards strengthening state actors and their (security) governance structures, often without directly addressing the societal roles of the non-state security actors.<sup>15</sup>

The proliferation of non-state armed groups is symptomatic of contested political systems and state governance structures, but it also links to strategic competition. The presence of multiple local conflict parties provides major powers and other external actors with opportunities to get involved in conflict arenas by supporting a local stakeholder. The geopolitical rivalries among state powers may then invite more external powers to get involved in the conflict situation by supporting other groups, and duly influence the inter-group dynamics in the conflict in general.<sup>16</sup>

Aside from the proliferation of non-state armed groups, today's conflict complexity is marked by the increasing involvement of multiple state actors and armies, including major powers.<sup>17</sup> Whilst most armed conflicts still take place primarily within states, the number of interstate conflicts is increasing. The first few years of the 2020s have already witnessed as many incidences of active interstate armed conflict years as the first decade of the 2000s.<sup>18</sup> Russia's invasion of Ukraine is the first interstate war since the Second World War in which a major power in the international system has sought to make both territorial gains and to change the regime of another sovereign state.<sup>19</sup>

Whilst overt interstate wars remain few, a more common scenario consists of external state powers supporting local conflict parties militarily or economically, thereby internationalizing the conflict. External involvement in initially civil conflicts is nothing new. The Cold War witnessed major proxy wars fought between the two competing blocs in the international system.<sup>20</sup> However, there appears to be a wider pool of external actors involved in conflicts today, who also support non-state armed groups (as discussed above) that challenge governments.<sup>21</sup> This increases the risk that state actors, including major powers, will be pitted against each other.<sup>22</sup> Digitalization and cyber arenas also provide new ways for external powers to become involved in a crisis more tacitly and without a military presence on the ground.<sup>23</sup>

The increasing involvement of external state powers in armed conflicts is intrinsically linked to strategic competition. In an era of heightened geopolitical

10 Helwig 2023; Nováky and Hefele 2022.

11 Spektor 2023; Ishmael 2022.

12 Creutz, Jokela and Saul 2023.

13 Mustasilta, Ruohomäki and Salo 2022.

14 See Davies, Pettersson and Öberg 2023.

15 Mustasilta, Ruohomäki and Salo 2022.

16 Anderson 2019.

17 Mustasilta 2021; UN Secretary General 2023.

18 Davies, Pettersson and Öberg 2023.

19 Ibid.

20 Karlén 2022.

21 Mustasilta 2021; Davies, Pettersson and Öberg 2023.

22 Davies, Pettersson and Öberg 2023.

23 Mustasilta 2021.

### Global armed conflict trends, 1989–2022

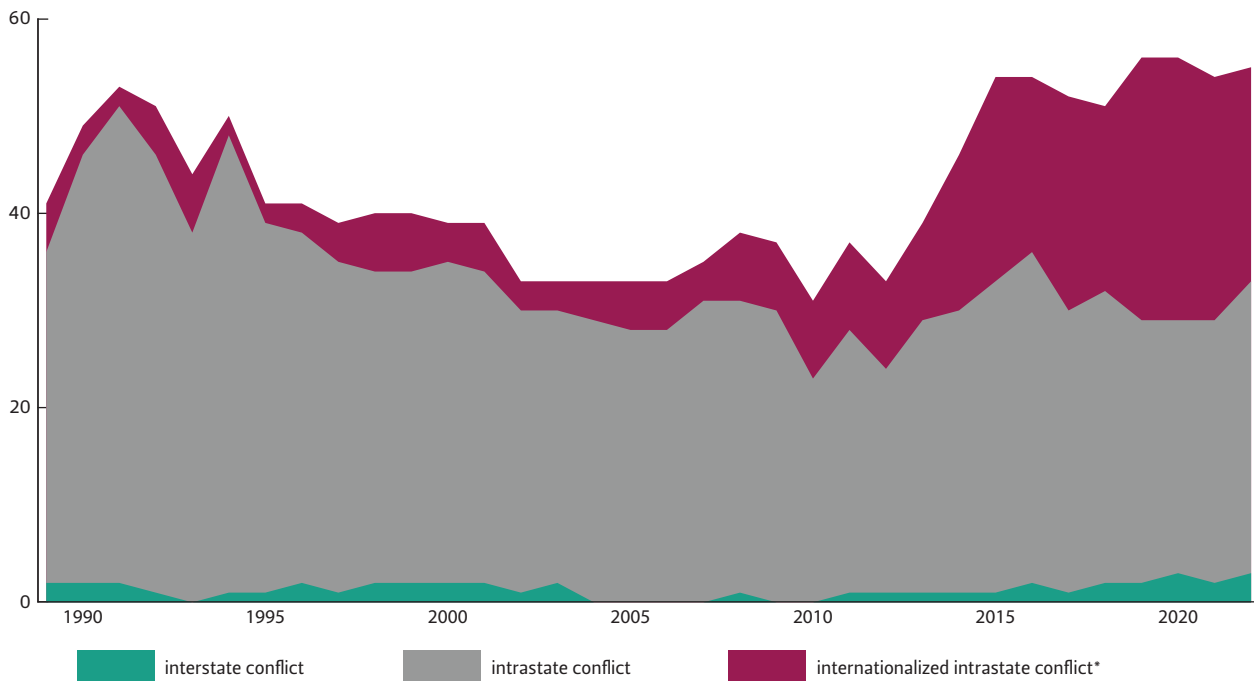


Figure 1. Global armed conflict trends, 1989–2022.

\*Internationalized intrastate conflict refers to countries' internal conflicts in which one or both of the primary conflict sides receive troop support from external governments.

Source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program: Davies, Pettersson and Öberg 2023

competition, conflict and crisis situations offer arenas for competing power hubs to gain influence. States and regions struggling with political crises and conflicts are more amenable and vulnerable to interference from outside powers and often provide concrete dividends (natural resources, geostrategic venues) that attract external involvement. Such interference may challenge conflict management and resolution efforts by increasing the number of potential spoilers of settlements reached, and by diverting attention away from the structural root causes of the conflict.<sup>24</sup> It can also prolong conflicts by maintaining the primary parties' capabilities to continue fighting even when their local support wanes.<sup>25</sup> In general, it requires any actor supporting conflict management and resolution to consider an increasing number of stakeholders in their activities.

## 1.2. Contested conflict resolution spaces

The expanding involvement of external powers in conflict situations also translates into more alternatives

and potentially parallel efforts to manage conflicts and build peace. As well as adding to the complexity, this challenges the EU's role in conflict prevention and crisis management by introducing growing competition into this realm.<sup>26</sup> China, India, and South Africa, for example, have played major roles in UN peacekeeping operations for years. Yet, particularly in recent years, China, Qatar, Turkey, and Russia, among other major state powers, have also taken more initiative in the fields of peacebuilding and conflict management.<sup>27</sup>

In the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, for example, Turkey has played a major mediating role in the Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI), also with a degree of success.<sup>28</sup> China has also put forward its own peace plans, as has a group of seven African states, albeit without much resonance or concrete follow-up.<sup>29</sup> The widening pool of mediators and peacebuilders has sparked discussion regarding their effectiveness and appropriateness in comparison to the dominant, often Western-led liberal peacebuilding efforts, which have attracted growing criticism due to the ambiguous

24 Ibid.

25 Anderson 2019.

26 See Karjalainen 2020 for effects on the EU's mediation support efforts.

27 Tardy 2012; Yuan 2022.

28 France 24 2022.

29 Gabuev 2023; Jones 2023.

outcomes in cases such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Mali.<sup>30</sup>

From the EU's perspective, some of these newer actors and initiatives in international peacebuilding and conflict resolution provide cooperation opportunities and regional or local partners to support in mediation and peacebuilding efforts.<sup>31</sup> However, particularly in conflict or crisis situations where the EU has traditionally played a significant role, the increasing activities of its strategic competitors, particularly Russia or Russia-affiliated actors, are seen as potentially undermining the EU's influence.

Some of the new actors and approaches to conflict management also present considerable departures from the key values and objectives that the EU aligns itself with at the policy level, particularly regarding human rights and democracy.<sup>32</sup> This poses a general challenge to the EU by introducing competitors into conflict management that appear to be playing by different rules. Seemingly more straightforward in their support without the burden of conditionalities attached to democratic development and human rights, the partnerships offered by actors such as Russia, China, or the Gulf States may appear more attractive and effective to the political and security elites of conflict-affected states than the prescription put forward by the EU.

### 1.3. Contested democratic governance models and ideals

Finally, democratic backsliding, which links to the backlash against human rights, is a closely connected trend that influences peace, security, and development. Democratic decline is a global phenomenon: increasing restrictions on civil societies, freedom of speech and assembly, as well as rising oppression of minority rights are also affecting some EU member states.<sup>33</sup>

The implications of democratic backsliding are particularly pronounced in conflict-affected and democratizing societies, where institutions tend to be fragile. Elected leaders that abuse their power, and seem unable or unwilling to address key security and development issues, also aggravate declining public trust in democratic institutions, such as elections. This may increase acceptance of alternative political rules.<sup>34</sup>

The political and security dynamics in the Sahel exemplify this poignantly: major autocratic steps in the form of military coup d'états have been justified by the putschists as necessary to address the security situations that civilian, elected leaders with their international supporters – including the EU – have been unable to manage.<sup>35</sup> The coups have been enabled by political instability fuelled by armed insurgencies and civil-military elite dynamics, among other factors. Yet they have also gathered public support and raised hopes in sections of society disillusioned with the quality and dividends of the seemingly democratic regimes.<sup>36</sup>

Notably, the headwinds against democracy link back to strategic competition. It is often in the interests of autocratic major powers to support or remain indifferent to autocratic solutions to crises and conflicts with the aim of undermining their own democratic competitors at the systemic level and domestically.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, approaching the era of strategic competition primarily through the democracy versus autocracy divide risks neglecting the realities of many states grappling with deep developmental issues or drastically changing climate conditions, and potentially alienates societies prioritizing partnerships on these basis.

This challenges the EU's conflict and crisis responses. Preserving and promoting democratic governance is among the EU's key foreign policy objectives and closely tied to its approach to supporting sustainable peace.<sup>38</sup> The EU now needs to situate itself vis-à-vis the different approaches to democracy, its primacy, and its challenges.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, the EU itself is struggling to live up to its commitments to supporting democratic governance. Particularly in conflict and crisis situations, the EU is often confronted with what appears to be conflicting pressures from security and democracy perspectives, as internal security concerns related to migration or counterterrorism push it towards collaborating with and supporting democratically ambiguous or outrightly authoritarian and oppressive regimes.<sup>40</sup> The EU's support for state regimes in countries such as Tunisia or Chad has been criticized for undermining its principled support for democracy, and for responding inconsistently to violations against democratic rule.<sup>41</sup>

30 De Coning and Call 2017.

31 See Council of the EU 2020 on the EU concept of mediation.

32 Yuan 2022.

33 Papada et al. 2023.

34 Afrobarometer 2023.

35 See e.g., Dersso and Redae 2023.

36 Cheeseman and Smith 2019.

37 Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2023; Yuan 2022.

38 Treaty of Lisbon (Chapter 1, Article 10a), EEAS 2016.

39 Research points to considerable benefits of democratization in the long term for societal stability, peace, and development. See Hegre 2014.

40 Skare 2022; Dandashly 2020.

41 Wintour 2023; Orbie and Del Biondo 2016; see also Raineri and Strazzari 2019.

## 2. TURNING INWARDS: THE EU'S LESSONS LEARNED AND EVOLVING AGENCY

As a result of these key external drivers, the contemporary conflict and crisis environment is arguably complex to address. There are more factors and actors for the EU to consider, increased competition, and profound challenges to the existing approaches and values. This puts pressure on the EU's capability development and priorities regarding its conflict and crisis responses. At the same time, the external drivers contribute to and coincide with the EU's own processes of learning from and responding to past successes and failures in conflict responses. The EU's approach to conflicts and crises is also influenced by the Union's evolution as a foreign and security policy actor more broadly.

### 2.1. Lessons learned from past challenges

Looking at the EU's policy and institutional development and investments regarding conflict and crisis situations in recent years, there are three interdependent but to some extent competing lessons that the EU and its member states have learned.

Over the last decade, the EU's policy development regarding conflict situations has come to acknowledge the need for a more holistic and coherent approach. The Union's 2016 Global Strategy introduced the 'integrated approach to conflicts and crises' as a multidimensional, multi-phase, multi-level and multilateral approach.<sup>42</sup> In a nutshell, the idea is that the EU deploys all of its means and tools – including diplomatic, security and defence, and development cooperation – more systematically and holistically in conflicts, engaging throughout the conflict cycle and at different levels (local, national, international) with its partners.<sup>43</sup> The integrated approach stresses the importance of a preventive and long-term engagement that addresses the structural and context-specific conflict drivers, and that rests on thorough analysis and early responses to the situation.

The integrated approach, referred to in the EU's renewed Civilian CSDP Compact as well as the Strategic Compass, can be seen as the Union's response to some of the key conflict trends discussed here.<sup>44</sup> It can also

be seen as a response to the recognized problems of past crisis management efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Mali, for example, where international responses were considered too siloed and detached from the societal conflict drivers. The EU's integrated Sahel strategy from 2021 and the new Civilian Compact reflect a growing awareness – at least at the policy level – of the need to address the underlying root causes such as governance issues, and to support the local actors' own capabilities based on their needs.<sup>45</sup>

The EU has also invested institutionally in a conflict early warning system over the last decade, and has developed its instruments to respond rapidly to conflict situations and to support human rights and democracy actors, for example.<sup>46</sup> These institutional and capability developments appear to acknowledge the lessons identified in research regarding past conflict management: the EU's conflict and crisis responses have been criticized as too heavily focused on support for the security sectors and capabilities of partner states, short-term stabilization, and border control, rather than supporting the resolution of conflict incompatibilities and contributing to conflict prevention/transformation.<sup>47</sup> Research has identified systematic gaps between the EU's intentions and principles regarding peacebuilding – local ownership, conflict sensitivity, efficiency – and its concrete action, and has provided recommendations on how to move towards a more holistic engagement in conflict situations.<sup>48</sup>

On the other hand, the changing threat and geopolitical environment and some recent crisis management experiences seem to have resulted in the realization that what the EU needs most urgently is to strengthen its military and security capabilities to respond to conflicts and crises.<sup>49</sup> This is inherently connected to the broader discussion on the EU's global role, power basis, and strategic autonomy (see section 2.2).<sup>50</sup>

Aspirations to strengthen the EU's capabilities as a security actor date back to the 1990s and the lessons learned from the responses to the conflicts in the

42 EEAS 2016.

43 Council of the EU 2018.

44 A new Civilian CSDP Compact was adopted in May 2023, whilst the Strategic Compass was adopted in March 2022.

45 See Council of the EU 2021 and Council of the EU 2023, respectively. The Sahel strategy, for example, commits the EU to support countries "by placing greater emphasis on the political dimension, with governance at the heart of its action" (Council of the European Union 2021, p. 4).

46 See Mustasilta 2022 for the EU's conflict prevention instruments, such as the instrument contributing to stability and peace (IcSP); for a comparative analysis of the EU's conflict early warning system, see Geelmuyden Rød, Gásste and Hegre 2023. Within the multiannual budget framework for 2021–2027, the EU supports democracy and human rights activists through the Neighbourhood, Development and Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) and its financial envelope dedicated to human rights and democracy.

47 Osland and Peter 2021; Raineri and Strazzari 2019; Orbie and Del Biondo 2016; Mustasilta 2022.

48 Boås et al. 2021; Boås and Rieker 2019; Ejdlus 2017; Ejdlus and Juncos 2018.

49 See EEAS 2021.

50 Lippert et al. 2019.



former Yugoslavia. Yet efforts to turn the EU into a more credible security actor have intensified over the last decade in response to an increasingly hostile external environment.<sup>51</sup> Among the key political lessons learned from external crisis management is the need for the EU to strengthen its ability to support its partners in security and defence more robustly. Notably, this lesson has become geopolitically motivated, as member states have considered that the EU's inability to provide tangible military support for its security partners weakens its leverage as a partner in comparison to its competitors, such as Russia or Turkey in Africa.<sup>52</sup>

The need to strengthen the EU's security and defence capabilities is a key thematic in the Global Strategy. The Strategic Compass, published less than a month after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, outlines several concrete means and milestones in terms of how the EU will further strengthen its agency in the security and defence realm, including as a partner to third parties.<sup>53</sup>

The European Peace Facility (EPF), initiated in 2017 and adopted in 2021, is a concrete example of the recognized need to strengthen the EU's security agency. The EPF, which has risen to an unforeseen role due to the war in Ukraine (see section 2.2), provides a mechanism for supporting local partners in CSDP operational contexts and elsewhere with more robust, including lethal, military support.<sup>54</sup> Beyond the EPF, research demonstrates that the EU's financial instruments addressing conflict situations are increasingly geared towards security sector support and capacity building.<sup>55</sup>

Beyond the lessons learned from these two directions, past crisis management experiences have taught the EU to define its mandates more specifically as well as enable adaptability in its operations. This can be seen, for instance, in the new Civilian CSDP compact.<sup>56</sup> Member states' willingness to contribute to cost- and personnel-intensive missions appears to be waning, and major stabilization and state-building operations, such as those in Afghanistan or in Kosovo, are seen as a thing of the past, being too expensive and risky, as well as destined to thwart expectations.<sup>57</sup> The mandates of the latest crisis management operations appear more

detailed in their objectives and functions. This is also to allow for better impact assessment, which is increasingly called for when evaluating the operations.

Overall, the political lessons learned from past operations and the contemporary strategic environment have led to smaller, less executive and more training and equipping-style crisis management missions. Since the Lisbon Treaty, most of the CSDP missions have been non-executive capacity-building and training missions.<sup>58</sup>

## 2.2. The EU as a global actor in the era of strategic competition

Finally, the EU's external conflict responses are shaped by its general development as a foreign policy actor, which in turn is strongly influenced by the internal and external political dynamics and expectations towards the EU. In particular, the member states' domestic political dynamics, strategic cultures, and subsequent interests and perceptions regarding the EU's global role enable and constrain the Union. At the same time, there has been considerable interest in recent years in how the EU evolves through crises, as the multiple internal and external shocks have not only demonstrated the EU's limitations and weaknesses, but have also given a major boost to its political development.<sup>59</sup>

When it comes to the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and its agency in responding to external conflicts and crises, key debates in recent years have revolved around the need for the EU to strengthen its security actorhood, as outlined above. Here, the concept of strategic autonomy and the quest for a more geopolitical EU have framed the discussion. The term strategic autonomy dates back to the security and defence policy field in the 1990s and the recognized need for the EU to develop more autonomous crisis management capabilities, especially in relation to the United States.<sup>60</sup> Since then, and in response to the recent geopolitical shifts and multiple crises, the term has evolved into a broad concept encompassing the EU's external interdependencies across policy fields – not only security and defence, but also technology, trade, and energy – and its management of these.<sup>61</sup> Most recently, Russia's war of aggression concretized several

51 See e.g., Whitman 2006; Sinkkonen 2015; Lippert et al. 2019.

52 Hagström Frisell and Sjökvist 2021.

53 See EEAS 2022.

54 Karjalainen and Mustasilta 2023.

55 Mustasilta 2022.

56 Council of the EU 2023. The new compact stresses the need to provide "focused mandates, with adaptability as appropriate, targeted to local needs, precise and achievable end states".

57 Pietz 2022.

58 Ibid.

59 For an overview, see Keukeleire and Delreux 2022; see also Helwig 2023; Håkansson 2023.

60 Helwig 2021.

61 Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022.

critical dependencies, for example in the energy sector, which member states have been affected by, but also showcased the EU's ability to take decisive, geopolitical action to reduce such dependencies.

More broadly, the war has re-energized the discussions on the EU's global agency and its characteristics and objectives as a foreign and security policy actor. The war seems to have accelerated an existing trend characterized by a more inward-looking and securitized *raison d'être* in the EU's foreign and security policy agency.<sup>62</sup> Under the pressure of an increasingly threatening and hostile environment, a shift is occurring whereby the primary objective of the pursued security capabilities and strengthened autonomy is to protect the internal security and geopolitical interests of the Union, rather than to better and more effectively manage external conflicts and crises.<sup>63</sup>

This has implications for the discussion on what kind of power the EU aspires to be, namely whether it can acquire more robust military capabilities and "speak the language of power" while remaining a normative power. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the EU's more conventional civilian power instruments and the pursuit of strengthened security and defence capabilities were seen as mutually compatible if they were ultimately used to achieve the same foreign policy goals and normative basis.<sup>64</sup> What will happen to this shared basis if CFSP and CSDP instruments are more directly geared towards defending the EU's internal security interests and its geopolitical status?

Relatedly, the shockwaves reverberating across European capitals as a result of Russia's war of aggression, and the ensuing changes in the strategic cultures of several EU member states, are having an impact on the EU's foreign policy.<sup>65</sup> Two factors are particularly relevant to consider here. First, the shared threat perceptions of EU member states concerning the situation and the relatively rapid reactions by the EU have allowed for an unprecedented response to the war, both in support of Ukraine and against Russia's hostility. This has catalyzed concrete development of the EU's defence cooperation and CSDP tools, and demonstrated to the EU and its partners and adversaries alike a new level of resolve and breadth of response.

The EPF and its repurposing within the crisis attests to this. Originally designed to make the EU a more

credible security partner in existing crisis management situations, the EPF quickly became the flagship of the EU's military support for Ukraine. Notably, its previously controversial part, namely the lethal aid provision, became particularly instrumental for the EU in the crisis.<sup>66</sup> Enabled by a sufficiently shared threat perception of the situation, the EU has been able to use the EPF and its lethal aid provision to provide military support for an external state partner on an unprecedented scale.<sup>67</sup> This has served to strengthen the EU's credibility as a united actor in the crisis. It has also allowed the member states to balance between their national strategic cultures and pressures to show decisiveness in the face of Russia's aggression.<sup>68</sup> Notably, breaking the taboo on the provision of lethal aid has also changed perceptions of the EU among its other security partners beyond Ukraine, and has duly led to a more general shift in external expectations and pressures on the Union in external crises and conflicts.<sup>69</sup>

Second, the war in Europe appears to have clarified the respective roles of the EU and NATO with regard to European security and defence.<sup>70</sup> Whilst the member states have enabled the EU to break taboos and take relatively decisive action to counter Russia's invasion and to support Ukraine, the war has also reinvigorated NATO's role as the guarantor of European collective and territorial security. Finland and Sweden decided to join NATO, with Finland's membership significantly strengthening NATO's Baltic Sea and Arctic presence.<sup>71</sup> Public opinion across EU member states also supports the primacy of NATO in the realm of territorial security and defence, alongside the perception of the need to strengthen national defence capabilities.

The EU's role is seen as complementary, however, and there is a general view that the Union should also strengthen its security and defence capabilities.<sup>72</sup> NATO is seen as the primary provider of deterrence and collective security in Europe, which the EU complements with its security and defence capability

62 See Mustasilta 2022; Novaky and Hefele 2022; Dijkstra 2022.

63 Skare 2022; Pietz 2022.

64 See e.g., Whitman 2006.

65 See Helwig 2023.

66 Karjalainen and Mustasilta 2023.

67 Notably, cracks in the common ground have become more visible lately, with Hungary blocking additional funding for Ukraine's defence through the EPF. See Barigazzi 2023.

68 Karjalainen and Mustasilta 2023.

69 This was noted by the HR/VP Borrell at the Schuman Security and Defence Forum in March 2023. In June 2023 the Council decided to finance lethal aid for the Nigerien armed forces, the second partner to receive such support. In the face of the military coup d'état in Niger, the EU has nevertheless announced that it will suspend its security cooperation with the country until constitutional order is restored.

70 The EU's Strategic Compass recognizes NATO's essential role in the collective defence of Europe and portrays the EU's security and defence capability development as complementary to NATO's role. See Iso-Markku and Karjalainen (2022) on the war's impact on European defence.

71 Pesu and Iso-Markku 2022.

72 Wang and Moise 2023.

initiatives, which also help to harmonize standards, for example.<sup>73</sup>

In this role distribution between the two, external crisis management and conflict responses increasingly rest on the EU's shoulders. NATO has returned to its core purpose and the odds of Afghanistan-style stabilization operations in the near future seem low. This is not least due to the US strategic orientation towards great power competition and the lessons learned from the failures of large-scale military stabilization and state-building operations.<sup>74</sup> European crisis management in external conflicts, and responding to emerging conflicts and crisis situations more broadly, is left to the EU to carry out. The EU's role in its neighbourhood could be further augmented by the difficulties that other regional organizations, namely the OSCE, are experiencing in this field due to the war.<sup>75</sup>

### 3. THE RESULTING TRENDS IN THE EU'S EXTERNAL CONFLICT AND CRISIS RESPONSES

Based on the discussion, what can be expected of the EU's general approach to conflicts and crises in the future? This paper identifies three broad trends deriving from the external and internal drivers, all of which are already visible and are likely to become more pronounced.

#### 3.1. Geopolitical motivations

Both the external drivers as well as the EU's own foreign policy agency development point to geopolitical motivations becoming more salient in directing where and how the EU responds to external conflicts and crises. Analyses suggest that EU officials and member states are more concerned about the prospects of losing relative influence to actors such as Russia, China or Turkey, and that this directs engagement with local partners in conflict and crisis situations.<sup>76</sup> This influences decisions regarding the launching of new operations, such as in the case of the CSDP mission in Mozambique,<sup>77</sup> but it also influences the nature of the engagement. Research suggests that the EU's engagement is increasingly focused

on maintaining partnerships with local state actors – even at the expense of paying lip service to democracy and human rights development – in order to protect its own security interests and maintain geopolitical influence vis-à-vis competitors, for example in the Middle East.<sup>78</sup>

Geopolitical considerations and member state dynamics behind conflict responses are nothing new, of course. However, in the era of strategic competition, motivating actions based on geopolitical interests has become more justified. This can be seen in the recent policy documents and public statements related to external conflict and crisis responses, which highlight the strategic interests of the member states as guiding factors behind the EU's engagement in mediation efforts, and vocally justify actions based on the geopolitical competition.<sup>79</sup>

What are the implications of the growing emphasis on geopolitical rationales? Within the EU, the geopolitical considerations seem to be equated with a more strategic approach to external threats. The EU's unprecedented action in support of Ukraine and against Russia is viewed as having increased its geopolitical credibility, and as having paved the way for more strategic action.<sup>80</sup> Yet, as others have suggested, the EU's relative resolve in the face of the war in Europe still says little about a more general strategic approach in the more competitive international system.<sup>81</sup>

A strategic approach requires shared threat perceptions among the member states beyond specific conflicts, and a shared understanding of the norms and appropriate means guiding responses – that is, a shared strategic culture – including clear objectives regarding the action. This, again, is still hindered by the diverse geopolitical interests of the member states, differing threat perceptions and experiences, and historically constructed norms and institutions guiding conflict responses.<sup>82</sup> As it is, the shared understanding appears to be limited to the will to counter the growing influence of the EU's adversaries in various arenas. Yet action taken mainly based on countering adversaries' growing influence is hardly strategic if it lacks a shared vision of the type of influence that the EU wants to project. Hence, the action remains inherently reactive rather than proactive.<sup>83</sup>

73 Karjalainen 2023.

74 See White House 2022.

75 ICG 2022.

76 Skare 2022; Hagström Frisell and Sjökvist 2021.

77 See Mustasilta 2022, p. 57.

78 Skare 2022.

79 See the Civilian CSDP Compact; first annual review of the Strategic Compass (EEAS 2023b); Borrell 2023.

80 See Nováky and Hefele 2022.

81 Helwig 2023.

82 Ibid.

83 See Helwig 2023 for a general discussion on the need for a European strategic culture.

Relatedly, the increasing predominance of geopolitical objectives in conflict and crisis responses raises questions about their compatibility with the EU's pursuit of efforts that are effective, conflict-sensitive and better grounded in local needs. On the one hand, in the case of Ukraine, the "hard" security support and geopolitical action has served the Ukrainians' needs better than the EU's support prior to the onset of the full-scale war.<sup>84</sup> On the other hand, the recent events in Niger – with military generals seizing control less than two months after the EU's decision to finance more military aid, including lethal aid to the army – raise questions about the weight of geopolitical rationales and thorough risk analysis in EU decision-making. Ultimately, the question concerns the prioritization of different objectives in the face of conflicting pressures: How are decisions made when objectives regarding peacebuilding and geopolitical influence contradict each other? How do geopolitical considerations influence the way in which the EU's actions reflect the needs and interests of vulnerable groups and civilians in the conflict situations?

### 3.2. Security-oriented hands-off approach

An ever more security-focused approach derives from both the development of the EU's foreign and security policy agency, as well as the pressures stemming from the strategic environment. Despite the development of the integrated approach and more rhetorical emphasis on a holistic approach, research suggests that the EU's engagement in conflict and crisis situations is more and more (not less) security-oriented.<sup>85</sup>

There is a clear recognition in the Strategic Compass of a need for more robust EU military capabilities and processes to respond to external conflicts and crises: one of the core concrete initiatives presented in the Compass is the Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC), which would consist of forces of up to 5,000 troops to be used in responding to rescue needs and/or in the initial stabilization phase in external crises.<sup>86</sup> The RDC, building on the existing Battle Groups concept and an envisioned function as a rescue mission force and/or initial stabilization force, clearly responds to the lessons learned from the likes of Afghanistan regarding the EU's inability to autonomously respond to sudden

security needs provoked by external crises. Moreover, the experience of Ukraine – which will remain the most pivotal context for the EU's conflict responses in the near future – speaks to the usefulness of hard security support and has led to a shift in expectations regarding the nature of the EU's support for its external partners.<sup>87</sup> Overall, the fragmenting security orders in many regions, and the upward trend in defence spending and arms proliferation, are leading external state partners to favour military and security support.

At the same time, EU member states have become less interested in cost-intensive peace support operations or risky crisis management missions overseas, and resources are increasingly committed (to Ukraine). The Strategic Compass and the Civilian CSDP compact both stress the importance of developing better focused, adaptable, and modular operations that support local security partners' capacities in specific realms, rather than carrying out large executive missions themselves.<sup>88</sup>

Investing in the capacity building and training of civilian and military officers, as well as equipping them, serves the EU in responding to conflicts and crises from multiple perspectives. It demonstrates security partnership and is perceived as a means of countering the growing influence of competing powers (e.g., Russia in the Sahel and Horn of Africa); it is a seemingly "technical" support that does not interfere in domestic, risky issue areas; it can serve European security and defence industries; and it minimizes the risks to EU troops and officials in conflict situations. This points to more hands-off yet military-oriented capacity building and material support. In short, the "train and equip" model of crisis management is here to stay.

The EPF is a prime example of the instruments to be used in conflict and crisis situations in the future, notwithstanding the uncertainties concerning its future funding.<sup>89</sup> The EPF's changed framing also demonstrates the growing emphasis on the EU's security actorness and geopolitical considerations. Since the beginning of Russia's invasion, the facility has been framed more directly as a tool for responding to a geopolitically hostile environment and for protecting the EU's and its partners security. This departs from the original narrative emphasizing its contribution to the EU's conflict prevention objectives and as part of the integrated approach.<sup>90</sup>

87 Dijkstra 2022.

88 See Ruohomäki and Ruohomäki 2023 for a discussion on the benefits of this trend.

89 Karjalainen 2023.

90 Karjalainen and Mustasilta 2022.

84 Karjalainen and Mustasilta 2023.

85 Skare 2022; Bøås et al. 2021.

86 Zandee and Stoitman 2022.

The EU's new Civilian CSDP compact can be seen as an indication of the civilian direction of conflict and crisis response. The compact reaffirms the alignment of civilian CSDP with the objectives of the integrated approach. The document also recognizes the contribution of civilian CSDP to mediation, preventive diplomacy, and conflict resolution.<sup>91</sup> Nevertheless, in comparison with its predecessor from 2018, the compact puts more weight up front on the objective of protecting the EU's own interests and security, as well as acknowledgment of the geopolitical shifts in the world.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, like its predecessor and the Strategic Compass, it is firmly focused on supporting partner states' security capabilities and capacities rather than governance capacities more broadly.

While the EU will undoubtedly continue to support more long-term peacebuilding and civilian conflict resolution through its development cooperation, diplomatic engagements, and conflict prevention tools, there are signs that it is becoming increasingly difficult to find a genuinely integrated approach that would tackle the underlying incompatibilities driving conflict and insecurity. The increasing emphasis on focused and modular non-executive missions, while framed as a means of building more context-specific and rapid responses, raises doubts about the impact that such efforts can have on the conflict dynamics, even in theoretical terms. Furthermore, the changed external landscape, with growing competition in the field of mediation and conflict management, as well as the changed geopolitical position of EU member states in specific regions, are shaping the incentives and opportunities for Europeans to act as facilitators and mediators, or to support such efforts.<sup>93</sup>

In the era of strategic competition, investing in concrete mediation and preventive diplomacy efforts and taking decisive action in these realms may not be considered politically rational either. Engaging in preventive diplomacy or mediation efforts to prevent conflict escalation is highly sensitive political action that may cause frustration among partners viewing the situation as a domestic security issue, for example, and push these partners to turn to other actors.<sup>94</sup>

### 3.3. Ad hoc arrangements and flexibility

Finally, the changing external environment and particularly the headwinds against multilateral forums, such as the UN Security Council, are driving demands for more ad hoc arrangements and differentiated integration, as well as flexibility in conflict responses. This is also driven by the EU's internal dynamics and the diverse interests of member states in participating in common responses vis-à-vis specific conflict or crisis situations.

The EU's modus operandi in conflicts and crises has been to partner with other multilateral actors, first and foremost with the UN, and to derive broader international legitimacy for its conflict responses from the UN Security Council resolutions.<sup>95</sup> Given the increasing difficulty in making decisions on mandate renewals for UN peace operations, regional organizations and ad hoc groupings will likely play an increasing role in responding to conflict escalation across the globe. In recent years, most new peace support operations have already been mandated and carried out by regional organizations rather than the UN.<sup>96</sup> This influences the EU's conflict responses as well. The EPF, for example, already allows for more diverse types of recipients of EU military and defence support, including issue-based coalitions (such as the G5 in the Sahel).<sup>97</sup> This development is likely to continue in the future, with a more diverse pool of third parties being on the receiving end of the EU's CSDP support and partnerships in conflict and crisis responses.

Pressure for more flexibly arranged conflict and crisis responses also stems from within the EU, particularly from the varied interests and priorities of the member states regarding their political will to take part in common conflict and crisis responses. In response to this, and in an effort to make the EU a more credible security actor, CSDP capability developments in the last decade, for example through the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the EPF, enable flexibility in the forms of participation, including constructive abstention.<sup>98</sup> The Strategic Compass puts considerable emphasis on adding flexibility to the EU's CSDP actions. For example, the Compass refers to European-led ad hoc missions that respond to crisis and conflict situations that the EU can support through the

91 Council of the EU 2023.

92 Council of the EU 2023; 2017.

93 Consider e.g., France in the Sahel.

94 Mustasilta 2022.

95 For some EU member states, a UN mandate is a necessary condition for an EU operation in external conflicts. See Zandee and Stoetman 2022.

96 Pfeifer Cruz 2022.

97 ICG 2021.

98 Blockmans and Macchiriani Crosson 2019.

EPF funding. Moreover, the new EU rapid deployment capacity concept builds on modular, context-specific troop formations that would benefit from “more flexible decision-making arrangements”.<sup>99</sup>

Domestic political dynamics and contemporary trends in member states intensify pressure on the EU to find creative ways to respond to crises. The rise of populist right-wing political parties in several member states challenges the EU’s conflict responses in general, as these groups are inclined to oppose stronger security and defence capability development within the EU, but also often counter the idea of substantive investments in long-term development support. Groups of like-minded and similarly threatened states will be ever more crucial in mobilizing EU and European-level responses to external conflict situations. At the same time, demonstrating EU-level unity in the face of external conflicts and crisis situations remains pivotal for the political agency of the EU in foreign and security affairs. Particularly in the era of strategic competition, and with the prospect of UN Security Council decision-making regarding international peace and security becoming more difficult, the EU cannot rely on legitimization for action to stem from the UN. This underlines the importance of developing a shared strategic culture that will ultimately enable common and effective EU responses to external threats to peace and security.

## CONCLUSIONS

This Working Paper has analyzed key external and internal drivers shaping the EU’s conflict and crisis responses. It has discussed how strategic competition contributes to increasingly diverse actors to be handled in conflict situations; growing competition over conflict management and resolution; and the contestation over (democratic) governance and peacebuilding ideals. Moreover, it has considered key internal processes – related to lessons learned and the EU’s general agency development – that intertwine with the external factors and mediate the way different external demands shape the EU’s policy responses.

Three emerging trends in the EU’s external conflict and crisis responses have been outlined: a geopolitical turn, a security orientation characterized by increasingly narrowly defined and hands-off efforts, as well

as ad hoc frameworks and coalitions. These trends have been present in the EU’s external action for quite some time. Indeed, one could argue that geopolitical considerations and a focus on security support have been basic elements in the EU’s CSDP actions and, more broadly, in conflict prevention and management throughout their development since the 1990s. This paper has argued, however, that the combination of changes in the external environment – characterized by deepening strategic competition and its implications – and the EU’s internal dynamics considerably elevate the salience and weight of these elements in today’s conflict and crisis responses.

The three trends catalyze several follow-up questions regarding their implications for concrete action in the future. A general question concerns how the various objectives related to geopolitical leverage, short-term security concerns and long-term sustainable peace are to be prioritized in connection with each other. While the language of “principled pragmatism” tries to present these different rationales as mutually compatible, in reality they often create competing pressures for action. As it is, a broad trend influencing the EU’s engagement in conflict and crisis situations and the related policies seems to be the prioritization of security – first and foremost that of the EU and its member states. In relation to security, conflict prevention, peace and democracy promotion appear secondary or instrumental, rather than prioritized objectives in themselves.

At the same time, the EU continues to struggle with old challenges regarding its conflict and crisis responses. Even with more robust military capabilities in place for external conflict and crisis situations, the effective use of these largely depends on the political will of the member states. While the pursuit of flexibility in decision-making and enabling ad hoc groupings in conflict responses can facilitate EU responses amid the diverse national threat perceptions and interests, a shared EU-level strategic vision and culture would be needed to enhance the predictability and consistency of these responses. Ultimately, this would also strengthen the EU’s credibility in the competitive international system. /

<sup>99</sup> See EEAS 2022; as Zandee and Stoetman (2022) discuss, the Compass does not specify what “flexible decision-making” means in concrete terms, but it refers to the possibility of sub-groups of EU member states executing CSDP tasks, using Article 44 (TEU).

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