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The European Union's crisis management efforts

Evolution amid a shifting international order and the war in Ukraine

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Summary

- Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the intensifying global geopolitical competition have led the EU and its member states to prioritise the defence dimension of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). This shift has affected the EU's external crisis management capabilities and priorities.
- As a result, civilian and military CSDP missions and operations have become increasingly 1) linked to the EU's defence and geopolitical interests, 2) smaller, more frugal and non-interventionist, and 3) platforms for delivering diverse EU security and defence assistance.
- These changes allow the EU to respond more flexibly to the security and defence needs of partner countries, especially when these needs align with the EU's own geopolitical interests.
- However, the strong focus on state-centric security and defence support narrows the scope of EU crisis management and comes with risks: democratic oversight, accountability and the local legitimacy of partner governments and security forces cannot be taken for granted.

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Introduction

The international order is in flux, with far-reaching implications for international crisis and conflict management efforts. At the global level, United Nations peace operations are in decline, as intensifying power struggles impede effective multilateral decision-making, and existing operations suffer from unmet expectations and legitimacy issues in host countries.[1] More broadly, multilateralism, inclusive peace processes, and comprehensive agreements seem to be falling out of favour, while bilateralism, ad hoc groupings, and a focus on narrow goals, such as the cessation of hostilities through transactional deals, are increasingly dominating the field.

This shifting global context also influences the challenges and opportunities facing the European Union (EU) as a crisis management actor in external conflicts and crises. For over 20 years and through more than 40 civilian and military missions and operations, external crisis management has served as the main means of operationalising the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Traditionally, EU crisis management has been guided by a commitment to multilateralism and the pursuit of a conflict-preventive and comprehensive approach to conflicts. However, the weakening of multilateralism and the intensification of geopolitical competition are putting significant pressure on the EU and its contributions. At the same time, internal pressures stemming from shifts in the strategic cultures, priorities, and capabilities of both the EU and its member states are shaping the Union's role in crisis management.

This Briefing Paper analyses how the EU has evolved as a crisis management actor outside its borders in an era of a full-scale war in Europe and a shifting international order. It first takes stock of the key developments in the EU's political priorities and policy capabilities regarding crisis management and security policy following the escalation of the war in Ukraine in 2022. On this basis, it notes the dominance of three broad changes in CSDP crisis management: operations are increasingly linked to the EU's defence and geopolitical goals; missions tend to be more limited and frugal; and the CSDP toolbox has expanded, with missions serving as platforms for delivering security and defence assistance.

These changes have a significant impact on the nature of EU crisis and conflict management. Specifically, they affect whose security and which issues are addressed through crisis management efforts, as well as the EU's crisis responsiveness and trade-offs between a short- and long-term focus. Overall, while reflecting broader international trends and enabling the EU to better respond to the context-specific needs of its partners, the ongoing shifts come with risks concerning the EU's broader foreign policy aims, such as democracy, the rule of law, and sustainable peace. They also prompt serious questions about the limits of crisis management and the distinction between conflict management and the building of security and defence partnerships.

1 Karlsrud, John and Reykers, Yf (2025) "Integrating Ad Hoc Coalitions in International Crisis Management". In Koops, Joachim A. and Dal Rosso, Martina (eds.), *The Future of United Nations Peace Operations*. Global Alliance for Peace Operations.

Evolving EU crisis management priorities and capabilities

Political priorities

The CSDP is largely an intergovernmental domain, with decisions made by the 27 member states, which diverge in their strategic cultures and foreign policy priorities. As a result, CSDP missions and operations have traditionally served a variety of national interests, ranging from managing migration pressures to safeguarding member states' economic interests. Member states continue to favour activities within their immediate neighbourhoods, upholding the East–West and North–South divide. Yet in the current strategic environment, a degree of convergence has emerged. Three priorities stand out as dominant, and somewhat shared, across the EU's crisis management efforts: keeping missions frugal, using them to build defence partnerships, and directing more attention towards the Eastern neighbourhood.

Firstly, fewer resources are now available for external crisis management. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and hybrid operations across Europe have prompted member states to invest record-high sums both in their own defence capabilities and in support of Ukraine. In 2025, NATO allies committed to allocating 5% of GDP to defence-related spending in response to the crisis in relations with the United States. Rising defence expenditure inevitably puts a strain on crisis management budgets. There is also the issue of personnel, as member states are under pressure to prioritise national security and defence when allocating their limited human resources. At the same time, lessons learned from past large-scale stabilisation interventions have made member states more reluctant overall to commit to costly overseas operations. The emergence of new, minuscule CSDP missions reflects the lack of political will to invest heavily in crisis management.

Nevertheless, military support-oriented CSDP is increasingly the area in which member states' interests overlap. Several countries that previously favoured a civilian approach to conflict management have shifted towards prioritising military missions in today's security and geopolitical environment. Instead of large, long-term executive operations, there is now a clear political preference for light-footprint "train and equip" military missions, including short-term military assistance to partners through instruments such as the European Peace Facility (EPF). The new shared confidence in the value of the CSDP in this regard is exemplified by the EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine, which is popular for its success in training and equipping the Ukrainian army. At the same time, however, this military-oriented approach is not limited to traditional capacity building, as demonstrated by the new EU Partnership Mission in Moldova, which supports the country in its capabilities to counter Russian hybrid interference.

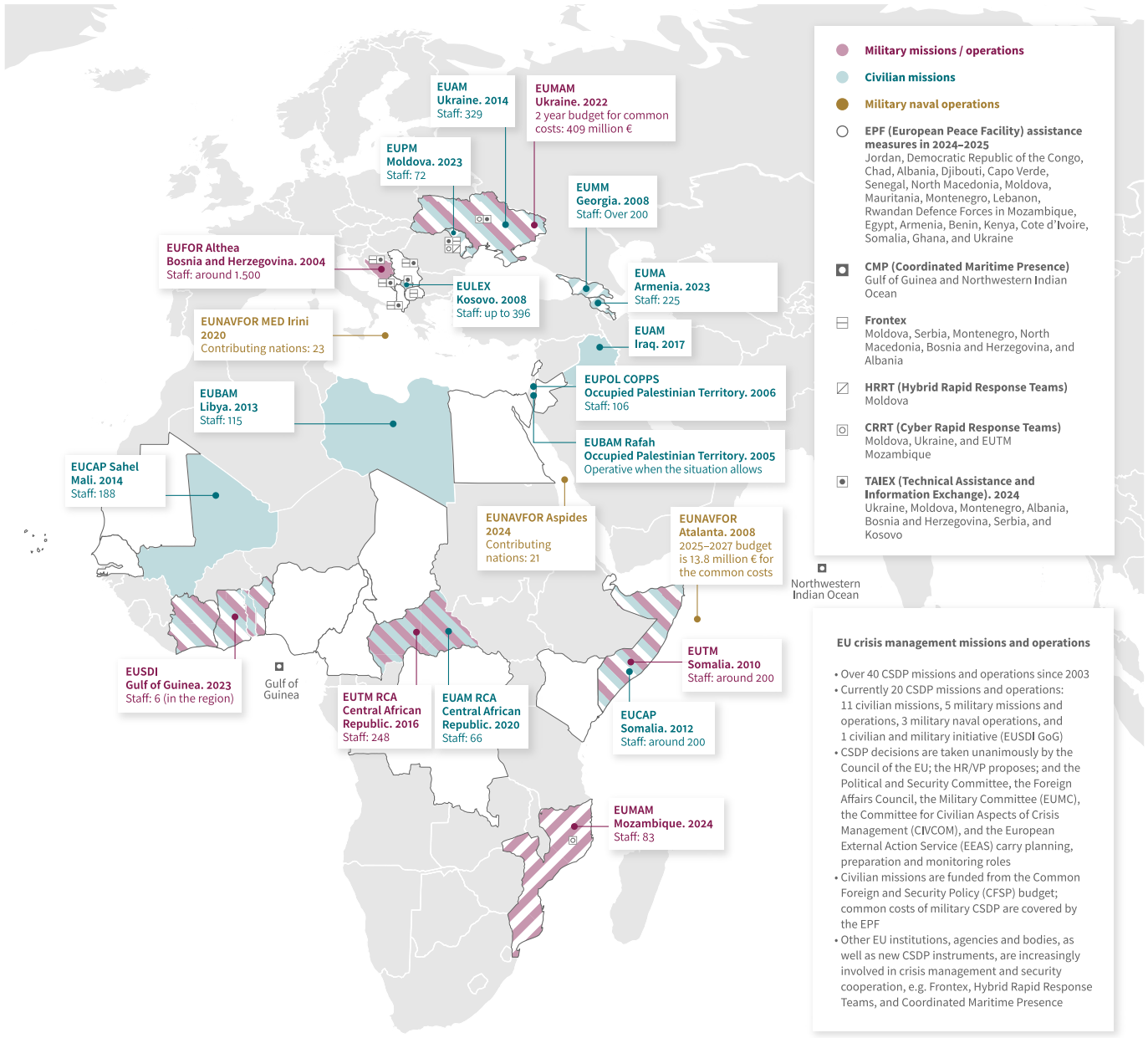
Perhaps the most striking change in the CSDP is the shift in member states' security attention towards the East, as illustrated by the new monitoring mission in Armenia. Prior to 2022, EU crisis management efforts focused on the Southern Neighbourhood, much to the frustration of Eastern member states. Russia's war of aggression has altered the situation and brought member states' threat perceptions closer together, fostering a shared understanding of the need to support Eastern partners militarily, even amid the headwinds facing the EU's CSDP engagement in the Sahel. Since 2022, three out of five new civilian and military CSDP missions have been launched in the Eastern Neighbourhood.

These priorities, particularly the military focus and the Eastern regional orientation, are undoubtedly still contested. Constitutionally neutral states have abstained from contributing to the funding of Ukraine's military equipment, and Hungary's blocking behaviour brought it all to a halt. The scarcity of financial resources remains the strongest point of consensus among member states. This, in turn, has brought the effectiveness and impact of EU crisis management under increased scrutiny.

Institutional and capability evolution

In addition to prioritising defence capability development and the pursuit of effectiveness in crisis management, evolving threats and changing conflict dynamics have prompted the EU and its member states to rapidly develop their capabilities to address challenges such as hybrid and cyber threats, foreign information manipulation and interference, and climate change. Within the CSDP, this is evident in efforts such as the Strategic Compass and the Civilian CSDP Compacts in 2017 and 2023, which aim to make new missions and operations more targeted, modular and flexible. In practice, this means that missions

EU crisis management engagement around the world



Map 1. The ongoing EU civilian and military crisis management missions, operations, and other initiatives
Source: The European External Action Service (EEAS). Personnel estimates are derived from mission and operation fact sheets, websites, and/or the most recent available figures in official documentation.

can serve as platforms on the ground, enabling the EU to swiftly deploy short-term expertise depending on the prioritised security issues at the time. Unlike traditional missions, which rely almost solely on member state resources, this expertise can also come from EU institutions, bodies and agencies.

The European Peace Facility was established in 2021 to enhance the EU's capability to act quickly in providing military and defence support anywhere in the world. The mechanism is based on two pillars: one reforming the EU's funding of the common costs of CSDP missions and operations with military or defence implications, and the other enabling an expanded scope of military and defence assistance measures through bilateral or multilateral cooperation. While most of the EPF's budget,[2] and the

2 Since its adoption, the EPF budget, initially €5.7 billion, has been replenished several times due to the scale of need in Ukraine and to maintain the facility's global scope. Thus far, the EU has approved €11.647 billion in military support, including lethal support, for the Ukrainian defence forces through the EPF and the later adopted "Ukraine Assistance Fund".

general attention regarding it, has been geared towards military assistance for the Ukrainian defence forces since February 2022, the mechanism has also been widely used elsewhere. Assistance measures, including lethal equipment, have been provided to support the defence capabilities of Moldova, Benin and Somalia, for example.[3]

An interesting chameleon in the EU's new crisis management capabilities is the EU Hybrid Rapid Response Teams, which can be tailored to the case at hand and deployed both inside and outside the EU. They can also be used to support both civilian and military CSDP missions and operations. They are only activated following a Council decision, as they rely heavily, but not solely, on member state experts. As such, they can be seen as a cost-effective alternative to much heavier and longer-term CSDP missions and operations.

"While EU defence initiatives and external crisis management activities compete for the same resources, developments in one can also benefit the other."

Approved in 2022, the Strategic Compass introduced several new instruments and policies that have the potential to reshape the EU's crisis management activities. One of the most visible initiatives, the Rapid Deployment Capacity, is now operational and should enable the swift deployment of up to 5,000 troops to support evacuation or stabilisation efforts in crisis situations. The Strategic Compass also signalled increasing readiness to use Article 44 TEU, which allows a group of willing member states to plan and conduct a mission on the EU's behalf. This opens up new possibilities for the implementation of EU crisis management activities in the future.

In response to the full-scale war in Ukraine, the EU has shifted its focus towards developing instruments and policies to support defence capability and industrial development within its member states, significantly expanding earlier forms of EU defence cooperation, including initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). New defence instruments and cooperation priorities introduced in the Commission's and High Representative's White Paper for European Defence[4] have a complex relationship with CSDP missions and operations. While EU defence initiatives and external crisis management activities compete for the same resources, developments in one can also benefit the other.

The Cyber Rapid Response Teams resulting from the PESCO framework can offer quick support in responding to cyber incidents, including in partner countries. Preparations are also underway to establish an EU Cyber Defence Coordination Centre to enhance coordination and situational awareness, particularly for CSDP missions and operations. Following the same principle of voluntary contributions, the EU can also implement the Coordinated Maritime Presence concept, enabling the Union to act together by improving the coordination of member states' existing naval and air assets around the world. This concept is currently being implemented in the Gulf of Guinea and in the northwestern Indian Ocean.

In addition to policies driven by member states, EU institutions, bodies and agencies have improved their capabilities to address security challenges beyond the Union's physical borders. For instance, the European External Action Service has developed ways to provide direct support to CSDP missions and operations in terms of their strategic communication needs. The Commission-led Union Civil Protection Mechanism can, in addition to its core task of providing humanitarian assistance, also be used for more security-related tasks, when this is in line with its mandate. For example, it has supported Ukraine's preparedness against chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear threats. In the same vein, the Commission's technical assistance and information exchange can provide targeted and rapid support to public administrations in EU candidate countries and beyond, including in the security domain.

Two examples of the expanding mandates of EU agencies are worth highlighting: the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) and the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA). Frontex was reformed in 2019, when it became an

3 See European Commission, "Service for Foreign Policy Instruments: European Peace Facility". https://fpi.ec.europa.eu/what-we-do/european-peace-facility_en.

4 European Commission, "White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030". https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6d5db69-e0ab-4bec-9dc0-3867b4373019_en.

executive actor with its own armed standing corps, but the Commission plans to revise its role and mandate again in 2026 with the aim of tripling its size. At the same time and alongside the entry into force of the Cyber Solidarity Act, ENISA established its Cyber Security Reserve this year to improve the EU's capacity to respond to significant and large-scale cybersecurity incidents and to support recovery efforts. Under certain conditions, the reserve may also be used to support EU partner countries.

Key outcomes and implications

Taken together, these evolving political priorities and capability developments contribute to three key outcomes in the EU's external crisis management: 1) CSDP actions are more openly linked to EU defence and geopolitical considerations, 2) CSDP missions and operations are smaller, increasingly frugal, and non-interventionist, and 3) the EU's CSDP toolbox has expanded and become more dependent on the capabilities and resources of EU institutions, bodies and agencies, as well as EU partners, with CSDP missions and operations serving as operational platforms for delivering security- and defence-related assistance.

None of these features are entirely new in EU external crisis management and their origins can be traced back to the 2016 Global Strategy.[5] Yet the continued deterioration of the security environment has accentuated their importance. While EU external crisis management has always been about the foreign and security policy interests of its member states, it is now more transparently tied to their immediate geopolitical and security- and defence-related considerations. This is particularly evident in the Eastern Neighbourhood. At the same time, the lack of opportunities to contribute to vibrant multilateral peacebuilding and conflict management processes, combined with intensified competition over influence and partnerships in various strategically important regions, has led the EU to prioritise these geopolitical rationales more broadly. This can be seen, for instance, in the wording of new CSDP mandates, referring to cooperation with like-minded actors rather than emphasising multilateralism as a guiding norm.

Moreover, with generally tight budgets dominated by defence spending, there are fewer resources and less attention left for the global dimension of the CSDP. At the same time, the adoption of new CSDP instruments and tools, such as the EPF and the EU Hybrid Rapid Response Teams, contributes to more flexible and specifically defined responses to partners' needs. Typically, missions are light in footprint and limited in the depth of intervention. If considered at all, executive military interventions in conflicts will likely take the form of swift, small-scale measures such as the Rapid Deployment Capacity or sub-groupings of willing member states. Notably, these outcomes have considerable implications for whose security is prioritised, which issues are addressed, and how broadly the EU responds to conflicts and crises.

Doubling down on the EU's and partner states' security

First, the three outcomes have implications for whose security is prioritised in CSDP missions and operations. The Global Strategy introduced more explicit language on protecting the EU, its member states, and citizens through crisis management operations. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this priority of safeguarding the Union and its citizens through external action has become more prominent in narratives. This is apparent in the shifted narrative surrounding the EPF, for example, which changed from an emphasis on conflict prevention towards the protection of the security of the EU and its partners.[6] Such a narrative shift improves transparency regarding the EU's global role and normalises it as a security actor (akin to states or other security organisations), countering earlier notions of "normative power Europe" and the "force for good" rhetoric, which many scholars found unrealistic or misleading.[7]

Moreover, after decades of emphasising human security and a comprehensive approach to conflicts, the EU is reverting to more state-centric forms of support. The focus on geopolitical competitiveness incentivises action that, first and foremost,

5 Council of the European Union, 14392/16.

6 Mustasilta, K. and Karjalainen, T. (2025) "European strategic cultures in flux? Case study on the European peace facility". *European Journal of International Security,* online first.

7 Juncos, A. E. (2018) "Chapter 5 Civilian CSDP missions: 'the good, the bad and the ugly'". In *Research Handbook on the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

strengthens the EU's attractiveness as a security and defence partner. It follows that as missions increasingly resemble military and security partnerships rather than conflict responses, local counterparts more exclusively include those who hold a monopoly on the use of force: the armed forces, law enforcement agencies, and the governments in power.

This does not necessarily conflict with citizens' security needs: in Ukraine, for instance, the EU's robust military support for the armed forces aligns well with citizens' prioritised security needs.[8] Yet the state-centric approach comes with risks: democratic control, accountability, and the local legitimacy of partner governments and their security forces cannot be taken for granted. The increased state-centrism and scarce resources for the EU's CSDP efforts also limit the Union's ability to engage with crucial civil-society watchdogs monitoring EU-supported security forces. At the same time, broader cuts in development cooperation and peacebuilding funding further complicate such efforts.

Broadening security issues, forgetting the conflict issues

Second, and closely related, the three outcomes have consequences for the issues addressed – or left unaddressed – in EU crisis management. On the one hand, the scope of security issues tackled through CSDP efforts has widened in response to the evolving strategic environment and the expanded toolset. Alongside a continued focus on border security and management (including through an increasingly empowered Frontex), civilian CSDP now focuses increasingly on capability support against hybrid threats, such as cyberattacks and foreign information manipulation and interference, including disinformation. The new emphasis on countering foreign information manipulation and interference is noteworthy, as it reflects the increased impact of – and focus on – the battle of narratives in crisis management amid intensifying geopolitical competition. In military CSDP, the growing focus on maritime security – and, more precisely, economic security and the protection of trade flows and global goods – stands out: all currently active executive CSDP operations are maritime in nature, the newest being Operation Aspides in the Red Sea.

On the other hand, issues not perceived as immediate security threats to partner states or to the EU attract less attention. While climate security issues have entered the policy level in the EU and member states, they receive little attention in the concrete motivations for CSDP missions and operations. Previously, the EU's reform-oriented missions aimed to strengthen the rule of law and democratic oversight of the security sector, but the increasingly popular, seemingly "apolitical" train-and-equip approach deprioritises broader institutional reform.[9] The new-era CSDP missions and initiatives also rarely address the political dimensions of conflict situations or directly contribute to peace or political processes. This reflects the decline in negotiated settlements and multilateral efforts: there is no peace to keep or political conflict-resolution process to support. Yet this also goes hand in hand with the EU's and the member states' focus on strengthening security and defence partnerships and managing security threats.

Improving responsiveness, risking an increasingly short-term focus

Finally, all this has implications for how swiftly the EU can respond to crises or partner needs, and for how its actions reflect a short-term versus a long-term perspective on conflicts and its own foreign policy objectives. In general, the shift towards frugal and non-interventionist crisis management, combined with an expanded and more flexible toolset, is conducive to swifter crisis responses. This is evident in recent CSDP efforts in the Eastern Neighbourhood, and the Red Sea, which progressed relatively swiftly from identifying issues to be addressed to the launching of concrete efforts.

At the same time, there is a heightened danger of short-sighted crisis management efforts that fail to address the drivers and causes of the security crises they seek to manage and that risk generating

8 Nizhnikau, R., Karjalainen, T., and Jokela, J. (2025) *Demands for European security and defence cooperation in Ukraine after Russia's invasion*, InvigoratEU. https://fiia.fi/en/publication/demands-for-european-security-and-defence-cooperation-in-ukraine-after-russias-invasion.

9 Farinha, R. (2025) *The EU Common Security and Defence Policy: Moving Away from Democracy Support*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/03/the-eu-common-security-and-defense-policy-moving-away-from-democracy-support?lang=en.

a backlash against the EU's own long-term interests and reputation. Such a risk recently materialised in Niger, where the EU had – for security and geopolitical purposes – doubled down on military support and assistance just before the military leaders launched a coup d'état and seized control.

Integrating crisis management efforts more firmly with other forms of support and with instruments that aim to strengthen accountability and address conflict drivers would mitigate these risks. Yet the basis and appetite for such a comprehensive approach seems to be faltering. As discussed, the EU and many of its member states are reducing funding for the actors and programmes that could enable a more holistic approach to partnership. At the same time, the EU has started providing EPF-funded military support for countries outside its civilian and military CSDP missions. Reflecting these emphases and omissions, the EU's Integrated Approach to Conflicts and Crises – agreed in 2018 and intended to guide its comprehensive engagement in conflicts – seems to have all but vanished from policy rhetoric and organisational charts.

Conclusions: Still about conflict management?

EU external crisis management has come a long way since the early 2000s and the first concrete CSDP efforts. Whereas the early missions and operations in the Balkans, Central Africa, and Asia reflected the US-led post-Cold War liberal order and its confidence in peacekeeping and external support for comprehensive peace and state-building processes, today's CSDP missions and operations mirror a considerably changed strategic environment: they are less interventionist, more focused on military support dimensions, and generally smaller and narrower in objectives.

The EU's toolbox as a security actor has expanded thanks to the institutional development of CSDP capabilities and the broadening of the Union's other crisis-response tools. In contexts where member states' threat perceptions converge, this allows for a more robust and effective crisis response. In Ukraine, during the early phases of the full-scale invasion, the EU was able to use and advance its CSDP instruments to meet its partner's needs, while also demonstrating commitment to its broader foreign- policy objectives of democracy, peace, and human rights.

"There is a heightened danger of short-sighted crisis management efforts that fail to address the drivers and causes of the security crises they seek to manage and that risk generating a backlash against the EU's own long-term interests and reputation."

Overall, however, while the EU is significantly stronger in capabilities and instruments than it was in the early 2000s, its crisis management is now much less ambitious with regard to the broader foreign policy objectives of conflict prevention, democracy, and peace. Civilian and military CSDP efforts are increasingly geared towards capability support for the security agencies of partner states and towards executive operations aimed at protecting trade routes and managing flows of goods and resources, rather than protecting civilians or supporting conditions for political settlements.

The changed nature of EU crisis management action raises the question of the extent to which it still constitutes conflict management in the first place. Playing a leading role in peacekeeping and conflict prevention through CSDP efforts still features in the EU's general foreign policy ambitions, yet the reality of many CSDP missions now revolves narrowly around military and security assistance and capability support for partner states. While security and defence partnerships can play a role in managing conflicts, they can also fuel conflicts and armed violence. With the decline in EU and member state support for other civilian measures aimed at peacebuilding, conflict resolution initiatives and longer-term development, the connection between the EU's narrow crisis management efforts and its broader foreign policy objectives seems increasingly tenuous. The question is ultimately about the ambitions of the EU as a global actor. In a time of diminishing multilateralism and increased power competition, remaining relevant and credible as a geopolitical power will require more, not less, ambition from the EU in its efforts to support and shape international security and the conditions for a just peace. ⬢

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