

# The European Union, an actor for peace?

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Militars de diferents nacionalitats portant una bandera de la UE

On 5 October 2012, it was announced that the European Union had won the Nobel Peace Prize. This was recognition for a political project that arose after the Second World War. The war was the fifth military confrontation between France and Germany in the previous 150 years and led to the death of 70 million people. A solution had to be found, one that was European and political. Through economic cooperation, European construction forged bonds that were strong enough to incentivise member countries to resolve conflicts peacefully rather than through war. Thus the Noble Prize was awarded to a territory that had been transformed from a source of armed conflict to one that had remarkably buried war as a mechanism of relations among its members. There is no doubt among those Member States: EU is a project of peace.

However, if instead of looking inwards into the Union, one looks outwards, this image of an actor for peace is less clear. Deeper analysis is required to obtain a more accurate, more complete and less categorical picture.

## **Institutional architecture for peace: a complex policy**

In political terms, a policy for war can intuitively be identified, as it would involve actions that aim to transform conflicts through armed violence. However, it is less simple to adopt the opposite approach: defining a policy for peace. It was Johann Galtung, one of the pioneers of peace studies, who differentiated between two concepts of peace. On the one hand, there is negative peace, defined as the absence of war rather than any substantial intrinsic elements: a peace that is the absence of war. On the other hand, positive peace goes much further, as it aims to achieve a harmonious and mutually beneficial relationship among different elements. It is a more holistic concept of peace, linked to respect for human rights, reducing inequality and promoting sustainability. It is a multifaceted peace, more closely resembling the idea of justice [1]. Thus, identifying the EU's concept of peace and how it is organised is not a simple task.

Article 3 of the Treaty of Lisbon states the Union will aim to promote peace, along with sustainable development, solidarity, eradication of poverty and protection of human rights, among others aims [2]. It also stresses peace and conflict prevention among the aims of EU relations with the rest of the world. It is thus an aspect of the general principles that guide its political actions.

But the most significant changes introduced in the treaty, the topic that concerns us here, were: firstly, the creation of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs, who was also given the vice-presidency of the European Commission; and secondly, the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS), the Union's diplomatic corps. Today, the position of High Representative is held by the former Italian minister Federica Mogherini. These changes were intended to provide the EU with a single voice in international affairs. The High Representative's 'twin hats', with seats on the Council and Commission, was intended to reduce inconsistencies in the Union and its foreign presence, one of the most frequent criticisms directed against it.

If one focusses on how the tasks for building peace policies are divided between the European Council and Commission, in general terms, long-term action corresponds to the community pillar, while shorter-term actions tend to be handled by the second pillar, either by the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) or the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).

In terms of promoting peace, alongside the treaties, the most relevant document establishing the Union's relations with the rest of the world is the European Security Strategy (ESS). The first ESS was drawn up in 2003 [3] and proposed exporting liberal democracy and human rights, thereby transforming the world in its own image. Such expectations were overambitious. Leading world transformation is a colossal task and requires political will, unity, and appropriate instruments, none of which the Union has [4]. The new ESS [5] dates from 2016. In it, the EU defines five priorities: security of the union; resilience to neighbouring countries; an integrated approach to conflicts; support for regional orders and reform of global governance. But the most substantial change is its

more realistic and pragmatic approach. Instead of aspiring to lead world change, the aim is to adapt to crises.

Strengthening capacities in European diplomacy and civil power is more likely to favour the EU's effectiveness in conflict prevention, transformation and resolution than an approach based on strengthening military capacities.

In short, both the Union's legislation and strategic documents demonstrate a concept of peace that links the absence of war to other issues, such as sustainable development, human rights, eradication of poverty and respect for the UN. The reforms undertaken in recent years (Treaty of Lisbon, the new ESS) aim to resolve the two most frequent criticisms: firstly, the general debate on the capability expectation gap, with overambitious goals coming up against insufficient conditions for transforming reality; and secondly, the inability to provide a single, coherent voice. Europe is built on balances between member countries, which are loath to give up their competencies in security-related matters and, consequently, promoting peace. The result is a complex institutional architecture, still under construction, which frequently fails to operate with the desired efficiency.

Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that Union foreign policy is not conducted in isolation. EU action is often weak because of how it is configured, but it also has to co-exist with the logic of its 28 Member States, who as autonomous actors develop their own strategies. Some of these countries seek to play a leading role in international relations, making it difficult to align their policies with those of the EU.

## Analysis of peace policy

The end of the Cold War brought about a change in armed conflict. The trend now is towards more complex conflicts with diverse causes, based on intrastate, rather than interstate, issues. They often affect the stability of neighbouring countries. Such conflicts have a high impact on civilian populations and often do not include regular, uniformed armies. Changes have to be made to traditional policies in order to tackle these new types of war effectively. We will see here what the European Union's most direct tools are for helping to promote peace. The proliferation of policies means such analysis must take the form of a summary.

*Crisis management:* The term *crisis management* only entered community jargon relatively recently [6]. During the years of Javier Solana, it rapidly became an aspect of European foreign policy initiatives. Decisions in this field were adopted by the Foreign Affairs Council, which approved the carrying out of missions. Since the first mission in 2003, the Union has carried out a further 38. The characteristics of European crisis management policy include civil missions, with a variety of goals (rule of law, advice, policing, border

assistance, reform of the security sector) as well as military missions. The first such missions were led by the Foreign Service, while for later ones the Council established an ad hoc operations centre.

Inefficiency, lack of materiel and personnel, lack of military and logistic capabilities and poor response and coordination capacities are some of the most frequent criticisms. This was the case in Libya, Crimea, and Syria, to name the most recent examples.

In recent years, the Union has advanced a number of initiatives to deal with these criticisms. In 2016, the Instrument contribution to Stability and Peace (IcSP) [7] was created to provide a rapid response to conflicts and crises. In 2017, the Early Warning System was established, enabling actions to become less reactive. A year later, the Council adopted its conclusions on the integrated approach to external conflict and crises. And more recently, the European Peace Facility has been approved, which also permits funding of operations in Foreign Policy and Common Security.

In this context, the debate on the need to build a real European army has once again arisen. It is based on a classic, conservative paradigm of international relations: exercising power requires a military force. Yet this is an unrealistic approach. EU's difficulties in crisis management are partly due to the implementation of instruments and structures that are still not sufficiently developed. But mostly, joint European action is hindered by the different approaches among member countries. A European army would not solve these differences, it would probably make them worse.

## Conflict prevention

Since the end of the Cold War, conflict prevention has been part of the Union's international identity. Back in 2001, the Europe Council approved the 'Programme for the Prevention of Violent Conflicts'. Today the Union has a variety of policies and instruments for conflict prevention. They are a response to a global understanding of prevention, ranging from foreign relations to instruments of trade policy, such as sanctions.

*Foreign relations:* The Union has built up different mechanisms for maintaining political dialogue with other states and international organisations (such as Special Representatives and European Parliament delegations). In the context of peace-building processes, the EU promotes the establishment of inclusive mechanisms that permits the representation of civil society, as a way of ensuring fundamental rights are respected. It has also shown a preference for multilateral governance mechanisms, hence its support for the International Criminal Court.

*Development cooperation:* The EU is the largest multilateral donor in the world and, together with its members, it provides over 50% of official development aid. This is a community policy and although the member States have their own cooperation policy, in the context of the Union it is directed by the Commission. Development cooperation includes mechanisms established with so-called ACP countries, with whom preferential relations are

maintained, including political dialogue and parity of institutions.

*Common Commercial Policy:* In terms of trade, the EU is a major power. Furthermore, the policy is completely delegated, in line with the establishment of the single market. Thus decisions on trade policy are made by the European Parliament and Commission. This has produced a number of initiatives: *Everything but Arms*, a mechanism that allows tariff-free entry for all products from less advanced countries, excepts arms and munition, as its name indicates; the Kimberly process, in which the Union participates and which helps identify the origin of diamonds to ensure they do not come from countries in conflict; and democratic conditionality, which consists of including clauses that require respect for democratic principles and human rights in trade agreements signed by the Union with other countries.

*Other policies:* In the context of non-proliferation and disarmament, the EU also has problems in providing an unequivocal voice. Council documents stress a commitment to multilateralism, respect for the United Nations and defence of disarmament mechanisms [8]. The Council has carried out a number of actions in this direction: in 2010 it created the EU Non-proliferation Consortium [9], it has recently renewed the SALW initiative [10], on light arms; and it has shown its commitment to the Convention on the Prohibition of Anti-Personnel Land Mines [11]. Yet 5 EU members are among the top 10 arms-exporting countries in the world [12]. The signing of international treaties remains a state prerogative, hence despite EU rhetoric, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons has only been ratified by one Member State, Austria.

## Future challenges and conclusions

There are three clear major challenges now facing the Union which affect peace policy. First of all, the large number of political instruments for maximising European impact on preventing and positively influencing conflicts requires as yet unachieved administrative political efficiency. The mechanisms established in the Treaty of Lisbon have only recently been implemented. External action, headed by Mogherini, has set out to improve management and lower expectations. This is good news in terms of efficiency, but in doing so the EU has lost some of the idealistic, transformational outlooks that legitimised it in the eyes of the world. Management of immigrant and refugee flows, in many cases from countries in conflict, is prominent in this loss of legitimacy.

Secondly, Brexit (if it finally happens; now that the UK is taking part in the European elections, anything seems possible). Among member countries, Britain still has the strongest bilateral relations with the rest of the world, due to its colonial history. It is true that the UK has not contributed to the steady progress towards European unity, but its absence will undoubtedly reduce the Union's political weight.

Finally, providing more consistent EU external action requires political will on the part of its Member States, now numbering 28. The most delicate topics generate divisions between members and put enormous limits on options for response and above all on the strength to

promote a rapid, united policy. Furthermore, the far right with its unanimously anti-European position is growing in many countries. The influence that this political family might obtain in both the European Parliament and the rest of the European institutions could limit the possibility of progress towards a strong, united Europe that promotes world peace.

To conclude, in recent years the EU has introduced substantial changes in how it promotes peace and relates to the rest of the world, (Treaty of Lisbon, the new External Security Strategy, its external service). These reforms aim to improve coordination in its foreign policy responses. The EU should not be judged on its failure to prevent or contain conflicts in its immediate context. In general, it contributes positively to the peaceful transformation of conflicts. Bearing in mind the multiple causes of contemporary conflicts, strengthening capacities in European diplomacy and civil power is more likely to favour the EU's effectiveness in conflict prevention, transformation and resolution than an approach based on strengthening military capacities.

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