Europe’s Coherence Gap in External Crisis and Conflict Management. The EU’s Integrated Approach between Political Rhetoric and Institutional Practice

The end of the Cold War initially relaxed the security situation in Europe and enabled the EU to press ahead with the peaceful unification of the continent due to its enlargement policy. The situation in the EU’s neighbourhood and beyond was and is different.

Wars of secession and civil wars between ethnic or religious groups, precarious statehood or oppression of the population by repressive regimes have triggered and continue to trigger crises and conflicts. Their effects endanger the security and political stability of the EU itself. The attacks by Islamist terrorists in Brussels, Paris and Berlin underline this, as does, for example, the great flight to Europe triggered by the ongoing war in Syria in 2015.

Since 1996, in response to these developments, the EU has sought to improve its ability in external crisis prevention, conflict management and post-conflict
peacebuilding not least through civil and/or military CSDP missions. The EU hoped for better outcomes above all through new approaches, which should lead to more political coherence and - according to expectations - thus to greater impact in terms of prevention and conflict transformation such as peaceful stabilisation and resilience. What these approaches have in common is that they should use the instruments available to foreign, development and security policy not separately, but in a networked and coordinated manner.

Based on insight, that there is a direct link – or as it was called nexus - between security and development, so that both cannot develop without the other, external crisis and conflict management was based on a new footing. This policy change can also be traced back to the fact that conflicts did not show themselves to be one-dimensional, but rather rooted in an entire bundle of causes and therefore made it necessary to use a variety of very different instruments that were and are not in one hand but in the hands of different government units. It also became apparent that the chances of successful conflict transformation could only be maintained if stabilization measures addressed not only state actors but non-state actors and civil society alike.

The EU initially introduced its own new coherence policy to overcome institutional fragmentation under the term “comprehensive approach” and subsequently developed it further into an “integrated approach”, as introduced with the EU Global Strategy of 2016 (https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf). Over two decades, policy documents have highlighted the EU’s commitment to work for peace globally and take its share of responsibility.
Yet has the EU also walked the talk? Is the “integrated approach” not only on a piece of paper, but has it also been implemented in practice? Is the EU indeed breaking new ground in strengthening cooperation and coordination at headquarters level within the European External Action Service, the European Commission, the European Council and the European Parliament? Above, have institutional and procedural innovations been introduced to promote cooperation between the European institutions but also between EU member states and other international multilateral actors in order to achieve the envisaged objective of greater political coherence?

This report attempts to look into these questions. It is part of a larger research project, in which not only the EU but also all 28 member states of the EU were examined as to whether and how so-called "Whole of Government approaches", that should provide for better coordination and deliver on synergies, were introduced in the field of external crisis and conflict management.

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