

Building Comprehensive Security:

Rethinking Europe's Toolbox for Peace and Conflict Transformation

Peter Hefe

Inge Brees

March 2026



Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

Building Comprehensive Security: Rethinking Europe's Toolbox for Peace and Conflict Transformation

By Peter Hefe­le and Inge Brees

Introduction: Why Europe needs a comprehensive security policy

Europe's current security approach is largely shaped by an understandable focus on defence and deterrence in response to Russia's war against Ukraine. Threat perceptions in Europe have changed. However, this renewed emphasis on the military dimension risks narrowing the EU's overall strategic vision of security, overlooking the complex political, social, and economic drivers of instability. Military strength can prevent or halt violence, but it cannot create conditions for sustainable peace. Without a balanced investment in diplomacy, development, governance, and peacebuilding, Europe will remain trapped in perpetual, reactive crisis management rather than addressing the roots of instability more proactively and sustainably.

This imbalance between defence-related investment (€343 billion in 2024) and long-term peace-building measures is particularly visible in the emerging architecture of the 2028-2034 Multiannual Financial Framework, where €190 billion is earmarked for Global Europe, the main instrument of the European Union for external action, promoting sustainable development, peace, and stability worldwide.

However, experience shows that Global Europe's strategic orientation remains vague. Comprehensive security is insufficiently defined and, in many cases, incoherently operationalised. One longstanding dilemma, among others, is how to align rapid crisis response with long-term reconstruction and resilience-building in (post-)conflict societies.

On the other hand, the wide range of potential contributions of EU institutions, political families, and civil society to broader security remains underutilised. This is the result of a lack of a clear framework—at the level of policy, systems, and financing mechanisms—that connects military hard-power with diplomacy, development, and peacebuilding as complementary pillars of a single security and foreign affairs strategy.

Based upon an analysis of conceptual, operational, and budgetary shortcomings, the following policy recommendations can be seen as a contribution to the current public debate on the structure and political orientation of the next Multiannual Financial Framework (2028-2034) of the European Union. These decisions will significantly define the scope and strategic options for Europe's global engagement, comprehensive security, and political leverage.

Policy Recommendations

1. Deliver a credible and comprehensive approach to peace and security by ensuring adequate resourcing and clear political choices.

For the EU's security strategy to be credible, political goals must be in line with budget and governance choices in the upcoming MFF. This means giving Global Europe enough resources to meet Europe's external security needs, and therefore the €190 billion euro that the European Commission is proposing, or the 10% of the total MFF that the Parliament's Budget committee is proposing for external action, is the minimum required amount. At the same time, we must make sure that long-term external action is not pushed aside by non-programmable funds that are allocated to short-term competitiveness goals. Combining humanitarian aid, the current NDICI (Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument), pre-accession assistance, and global affairs into one tool can make things more flexible, but it could also make it easier for the Commission and Council to make decisions without being clear, transparent, or subject to democratic review by the Parliament, and reduce the space for gathering the diverse expertise needed for a comprehensive approach to security. The next framework should bring back strategic coherence, make parliamentary oversight stronger, and make conflict sensitivity necessary for all programming.

The MFF 2028–2034 should also make conflict prevention, resilience, and peacebuilding more important in Global Europe to keep up with the growing fragility of the world. There should be a tailored approach for fragile and conflict affected areas, ensuring that beyond humanitarian aid, there is both longer term funding for resilience, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding, as well as flexible funding for rapid response.

When put together, these steps would let civilian tools do their full job alongside defence as part of Europe's overall security posture. The global cost of conflict was EUR 18.2 trillion in 2023, equivalent to 13.5% of the world's economic activity, or EUR 2,266 per person ([IEP](#)). Preventing and addressing violent conflict is a strategic and economic necessity.

2. Embed Do-no-Harm and Conflict sensitivity as mandatory requirements into the next MFF

The new MFF should make "Do No Harm" and "conflict sensitivity" basic rules for all EU external actions, such as Global Europe, including Global Gateway, trade, climate action, and fast-reaction tools. Funding for development must still be available to all fragile and conflict-affected areas, not only those that are considered "extremely fragile." This is because long-term engagement is necessary to stop people from going back to war, and lower the causes of forced displacement, and fight violent extremism. EU programming should focus more on bottom-up resilience, trust building between people and between people and their institutions, governance support, and ways to reduce violence, even in politically sensitive areas where working with state authorities is hard but long-term stability depends on sustained engagement. A diversification of modalities, including working with civil society actors, would allow to increase stability and reduce violence also in those difficult contexts.

3. Ensure long-term, predictable financing for conflict prevention and peacebuilding

To make sure that peacebuilding continues across regional as well as global pillars of the Global Europe Instrument, the MFF should have a ring-fenced, multi-year budget, whereby in areas affected by conflict, peace should be a standing priority for EU programming, ensuring minimum allocations of 10-15% of the country envelope for the duration of the MFF ; 7–10-year programme windows are much more aligned with realistic peacebuilding timelines and would allow for a much more strategic approach and stronger legislative oversight. At the same time, there should still be a specialised rapid response tool that combines the Commission's quick action with appropriate responsibility by the European Parliament. To restore political and public legitimacy, the EU should talk about a "prevention dividend", and showcase local results and voices, demonstrating the important connections and impacts of peacebuilding as part

of a comprehensive security strategy. With violent conflict disrupting critical supply chains and trade and driving the displacement of over 117 million people, these “peace dividends” should also be recognised in priority areas like competitiveness and migration management.

4. Better balance the EU’s immediate crisis response with long-term peacebuilding

Europe needs a clear and believable story that connects its principles and strategic interests to prevention and peacebuilding. Comprehensive security should not be framed as a choice between hard security and long-term peacebuilding: while rapid crisis response is indispensable, without sustained investment in prevention and resilience, the EU risks higher long-term costs, weaker global credibility, and growing strategic vulnerabilities. The military considers itself a last resort and invests in deterrence. For a much more comprehensive picture, the EU's larger strategic and defence frameworks should build on the complementarity of leverage Europe's unique strengths in trade, development cooperation, humanitarian action, and partnership-building. Cuts to peacebuilding, development, and humanitarian aid are not helpful and should not be seen as a trade-off with defence budgets. Effective security requires a coordinated employment of defence, diplomacy, development, peacebuilding, and human security measures. This reasoning must be conveyed more effectively through specific, country-level analyses that connect fragility and conflict to EU priorities such as competitiveness, migration, supply chains, and energy security. Having a clear analysis and strategy should then be communicated through evidence-based messaging—customised for various audiences—that emphasises the long-term advantages and cost effectiveness of prevention and of a comprehensive strategy, as opposed to short-termism.

5. Better connect the role of the European Parliament and Political Parties with the expertise of NGOs

The European Parliament, political parties, and civil society organisations all play a key role in shaping a credible and accountable EU approach to comprehensive security. For NGOs and expert organisations to have a real impact, their engagement needs to be focused, timely, and intricately connected to ongoing parliamentary debates. Bringing thematic perspectives into country discussions and linking country

knowledge to thematic issues helps keep prevention and peacebuilding on the agenda. In practice, short and regular updates, direct exchanges with parliamentary staff, speaking roles in parliamentary committees, and consistent follow-up tend to be more effective than long reports—especially when input is provided shortly before urgency resolutions, when decision-makers often lack up-to-date information. Strengthening the Parliament's role also depends on clearer ways to scrutinise decisions, shared ownership of priorities, and better information sharing. This includes establishing more frequent, structured strategic dialogues, not limited to annual exchanges, between the Commission, EEAS, the European Parliament, and, where relevant, civil society experts, on Global Europe priorities aligned with conflict risk trends.

Disclaimer

This publication receives funding from the European Parliament.

© 2026 Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies

The European Parliament and the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies assume no responsibility for facts or opinions expressed in this publication or their subsequent use. Sole responsibility lies with the author of this publication.