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Strategic choices to connect peace, defence and deterrence

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Summary

The EU is reframing its security approach in response to hybrid threats and Russia's war in Ukraine, but also the shift in US foreign and security policy. Moving away from its traditional 'soft security' identity, the EU increasingly prioritises strategic autonomy, military readiness and deterrence. This structural shift is redirecting political attention and financial resources, creating a real risk of sidelining conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

Based on consultations across EU institutions and member states, and a closed-door workshop held in March 2026, this paper presents three main findings. First, the security re-alignment prioritises defence, actively framing deterrence as conflict prevention. This concentrates focus on the Eastern Flank, risking support for fragile countries. Second, the 'integrated' and '3D' approaches remain conceptually sound but are functionally hindered by institutional fragmentation and a lack of political drive. Third, defence policy shifts are messy due to split competencies. The shift towards defence is primarily driven by EU member state capitals rather than EU institutions, creating a complex policy architecture with persistent operational silos among defence, security and peace actors.

Despite these challenges, there are strategic opportunities to bridge the defence and peace agendas. The EU should clarify its narrative, affirming its identity as a peace actor and framing defence and human security as mutually reinforcing. Furthermore, the EU should foster structured dialogue between military and peace actors, expanding deterrence to include whole-of-society resilience. Finally, in the next MFF, the EU must secure dedicated funding for conflict prevention and make conflict sensitivity a cross-cutting requirement across all financial instruments.

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Acronyms

3D-approach	Development-Diplomacy-Defence
CPPB	Conflict prevention and peacebuilding
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
EPF	European Peace Facility
EU	European Union
EUCO	European Council
GEI	Global Europe Instrument
HDP	Humanitarian-development-peace
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
ODA	Official Development Assistance
PSC	Political and Security Committee

Executive summary

The EU is fundamentally reframing its approach to security, moving away from its traditional 'soft security' identity, toward a posture defined by strategic autonomy, military readiness and deterrence. While the EU remains a peace actor by treaty, the evolving threat landscape – marked by the war in Ukraine, hybrid warfare and risks to internal border security– has driven the EU to increase and modernise its defense capabilities. European defence investments surged by 42% in 2024 alone. A new EU security strategy is expected before the July 2026 NATO summit in Ankara.

However, this structural shift risks sidelining needs-based conflict prevention and peacebuilding, potentially depleting the policy space and financial resources required for long-term stability in fragile regions.

Our consultations across EU institutions and member states yielded three main findings:

- **Finding 1: The security re-alignment puts defence and deterrence first, sidelining peacebuilding.** Attention to conflict prevention is weakening, with peacebuilding issues hardly appearing on the European Council agenda. Geopolitical shifts have led the EU to actively frame investment in military capabilities as an investment in peace, with deterrence considered a necessary component of conflict prevention. Geographically, the focus has pivoted on the Eastern Flank, risking the depletion of support and policy space for fragile countries.
- **Finding 2: The 'integrated approach' and '3D-approach' are conceptually supported but dysfunctional.** Attempts to integrate defence, development and peace/diplomacy are far from new and in many contexts imperfect. While the integration of diplomacy, defence, and development remains logically sound, these frameworks currently lack political drive and suffer from institutional fragmentation. Implementation is often personality-driven and ad-hoc rather than institutionalised. Moreover, building trust between military and civilian actors remains difficult due to perceived ideological resistance and a fear of contradicting mandates.
- **Finding 3: Policy shifts around defence are messy given split competencies.** The shift towards defence is primarily driven by EU member state capitals rather than EU institutions, creating a complex policy architecture with blurred comparative advantages. Defence, security, and peace actors continue to operate in "stovepipes" or siloes. Finally, experts express worry that the expansion of the EU's defense industry may lead to

increased arms exports without sufficient enforcement of international humanitarian law or due diligence.

Despite these challenges, the consultations also revealed strategic opportunities to bridge the gap between the defence and peace agendas:

- **Clarify the EU's narrative**: The EU should explicitly affirm its identity as a peace actor, articulating a political narrative that frames defence, resilience, conflict prevention, and human security as mutually reinforcing agendas, which are needed in parallel and not in a sequence..
- **Use defence build-up as leverage for better standards (do no harm)**: As defence budgets grow, the EU should use this leverage to establish conflict sensitivity assessments and due diligence as non-negotiable minimum criteria for all defence-related external actions (such as CSDP missions and the EPF). This should include developing sector-specific guidance for defence planners in cooperation with peacebuilding organisations that already do such due diligence.
- **Foster structured dialogue and broad resilience**: Move beyond ad-hoc consultations to regular, structural dialogue between military actors and peacebuilders, and expand the concept of deterrence to include whole-of-society resilience, such as education and democratic cohesion.
- **Redefining roles, approaches and networks to enhance complementarity and mutual understanding**: As the balance between peace and defence shifts, actors are adapting their roles and networks. While diplomacy should assume the overall coordinating umbrella, on the one hand peacebuilders should proactively engage with defense planning divisions. On the other hand, military actors, recognising they "cannot do it all," should open channels for collaboration with non-military experts in fields like extremist violence prevention and hybrid threats.
- **The next MFF**: To counter the risk of budgetary erosion, the EU must secure dedicated space for conflict prevention and make conflict sensitivity a cross-cutting requirement across all funding instruments, including those supporting defence capabilities.

1. Introduction

1.1 About this discussion paper

This discussion paper is the result of a partnership between ECDPM and Search for Common Ground, which aims to strengthen ongoing policy discussions and processes on the EU's future engagement in fragile and conflict-affected settings. This paper aims to support inclusive, transparent, and evidence-based policy analysis, while facilitating dialogue and outreach among key stakeholders.

After a short overview of the current context, the next sections will outline the main findings from consultations with EU institutions, EU member states representatives and experts held between October 2025 and January 2026. A first draft of the paper served as a starting point for a closed-door workshop and discussion that ECDPM organised on 20 March 20, 2026. Main points of discussion raised during this closed-door workshop are also integrated. After the findings, we present a number of opportunities and options to bridge the gap between the defence and peace agendas. We present and discuss different concepts related to defence, deterrence, conflict prevention, peacebuilding and others. To ensure clarity and a shared understanding, a glossary is provided at the end of this document, outlining how these terms are defined and used in this note.

1.2 An evolving context

The evolving threat landscape and uncertain geopolitical order have driven the European Union (EU) and its member states to reframe their understanding and operationalisation of security. While centrally remaining a peace actor, Europe is shifting to a more 'hard security' posture, increasing and modernising its defence capabilities, strengthening its strategic autonomy and overall military readiness to face global threats that threaten Europe's internal security, including the security of its own borders.

This shifting inwards is redirecting resources and priorities: if Europe's external actions have traditionally supported the development and stability of partner countries to prevent spillover effects (such as forced displacement or regional instability and conflicts), unprecedented cuts in official development assistance (ODA) and surging military spending send the clear message that Europe increasingly seeks to manage global threats through military deterrence, self-reliance (or strategic autonomy) and hard security measures (with a focus on European defence capabilities) (Sherriff, 2026). European policy increasingly adopts a logic of 'peace through deterrence' (EC, 2025a). The war in Ukraine has

not only accelerated this transformation, but served as a turning point for the EU's approach to security and defence.

Internally, since 2022, European defence investments have grown substantially (rising by 42% in 2024 alone)(Council of the European Union, N.d.b) with a view to modernise outdated military capabilities and prepare for hybrid threats, which are considered to be among the highest risks to the EU in 2026 (Anghel, 2026). The EU has also strengthened its role in coordinating and supporting member states' efforts. Initiatives such as the European Defence Fund (EC, N.d.a.)and the European defence industry programme aim to pool resources, foster innovation, and enhance collective preparedness (Council of the European Union, N.d.b). The European Commission has also announced a new EU security strategy which is expected to shift the needle on how the EU aims to ensure security, at home and abroad (Ionta, 2026).

Externally, while peacebuilding and conflict prevention support have not been abandoned, the mid-term review (Council of the European Union, N.d.c) of the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) revealed that "in almost every single case, the security, peace and governance-related programming priorities received less funding than any other priority." This is despite continued strong public support for peace as an EU and national priority as evidenced in a number of recent surveys (EP, 2025).[1] Meanwhile, the European Peace Facility (EPF)(EC, n.d.b) has become a central instrument in the EU's ambition to act as a geopolitical and security actor, enabling for the first time the financing of lethal military equipment (Hauck, 2022).

Looking ahead, the proposed next MFF is expected to further consolidate these trends. The Global Europe instrument (GEI) is expected to include an unprecedented level of flexibility, and will no longer include earmarking for conflict prevention and peacebuilding. In the absence of an EU integrated approach or dedicated strategy to respond to fragility (Hauck and Desmidt, 2025), there is a **risk that attention to conflict prevention and peacebuilding** from a needs-based approach will become **sidelined** to geopolitical priorities. This might translate in less funding for fragile and conflict-affected settings, despite the rising levels of violent conflict and root causes of fragility projected globally(OECD, 2025). At the same time, the next MFF will include higher attention to defence and

[1] For example, in a survey conducted with 1800 Belgians across regions, gender, and political alignment, 85% believe that peacebuilding is important, with the most popular reasons among respondents for the Belgian government to support peacebuilding being that it reduces the likelihood of war, increases stability in the world, and protects human rights and human dignity worldwide, and that it is our moral duty to prevent and end violence.

(military) security, with a boost in defence industry funding, closely tied to the EU's push to strengthen its (economic) competitiveness.[2]

As NATO member states (including EU member states) collectively agreed in June 2025 to increase their defence spending to 5% of their countries' economic output by 2035 (NATO, 2025), there will be considerable implications on NATO and thus EU member states already facing fiscal constraints. In many member states, increased defence spending has directly or indirectly affected spending on international cooperation, including peacebuilding support, despite recognised complementarity (The Guardian, 2025). Another emerging opportunity is that some peace and security-related ODA may also be reportable under NATO's 1.5% resilience and security spending target, which weakens the argument that aid budgets must be cut to help meet the 5% benchmark. While the precise scope remains unclear, this potential overlap suggests governments could better align defence, security and peace investments without treating ODA and NATO-related spending as competing priorities.

Taken together, these key developments will lead to major shifts in funding and (political and policy) attention for peacebuilding and defence, at both EU's and its member states' level.

2. Main findings: Balancing defence and peacebuilding

Finding 1.
The security re-alignment puts defence and deterrence[3] first amongst all EU institutional and member state interlocutors, in effect largely (though not completely) sidelining peacebuilding in policy decisions and framing, as well as in terms of budget. Several interlocutors note that this risks eroding peacebuilding efforts, which require less budget, but longer-term engagement and political attention. Most interlocutors acknowledge the need to invest in 'softer' security, but the framing is clearly more defence than peace-oriented; coined as 'deterrence is conflict prevention', 'peace through strength' and the embrace of 'Si vis pacem, para bellum'.

The geopolitical shift triggered by the war in Ukraine and the commitment of NATO member states (including EU members) to the increased NATO defence spending targets, dominates the EU's external action agenda. This increased commitment is amongst other reasons driven by a shift in U.S. foreign and

[2] For example, the defence and space window of the new European Competitiveness Fund will allocate € 131 billion to support investment in defence, security and space, which is five times more compared to the current MFF (EC, 2025b).
[3] Please check the glossary at the bottom of this paper for a definition of terms.

security policy, which provided the EU with decades long security guarantees. Without a doubt this directly impacts the policy and budgetary space for conflict prevention and peacebuilding (CPPB). This is leading to **three key shifts**: 1) in the political prioritisation and approaches, 2) in the geographic focus and 3) in the narrative or conceptualisation of defence and peace. **These shifts are analysed below**.

Shifts in the political prioritisation and approaches

First, the political prioritisation is shifting. Amidst geopolitical transition, the war in Ukraine, as well as growing transatlantic tension with the United States, there has been more support for European 'strategic autonomy' and growing rearmament. But public opinion is less clear-cut. While recent surveys highlight that 70% of Europeans are in favour of increasing military spending (Polling Europe, 2025), including to be ready to face today's hybrid threats, European polling notes a continued support to invest in peace and security, beyond defence spending (EP, 2025).[4]

Political priorities are in any case moving from peace to increasing European defence capabilities and security. Experts and policy makers also confirm that attention to conflict prevention and peacebuilding is overall weakening. As a consequence, peacebuilding issues **hardly made it to the European Council (EUCO) agenda** anymore. At the same time, interviewees noted a clearer European focus on its own territorial defence as a consequence of Russia's invasion, with related funding expected to increase (Riddervold and Rieker, 2024). They cautioned that increasing funding for territorial defence might further diminish an already depleting support for fragile countries and conflict-prevention, and might push the EU an additional step away from its values-based agenda.

However, the EU and member states showed a more balanced approach in response to the recent U.S.-Israel conflict with Iran, where EU positioning and statements emphasised the risks of militarised approaches and the importance of de-escalation. Workshop participants expressed cautious hope that this might inform a renewed European appreciation of the need to invest in de-escalation capacities as a necessary complement to defense capacities in a turbulent geopolitical context.

While defence is now a clear priority for the EU and its member states, there is no clear coherence between member states. For example, according to interviewees

[4] According to the Autumn 2025 Eurobarometer, when asked what EU action would have the highest positive impact on Europeans' lives in the next year, 'ensuring peace and stability' ranked significantly higher (42%) than 'strengthening European security and defense' (22%).

the EU is pushing to keep a unified 'threat picture', but member states perceive threats differently: for some (Eastern) EU member states it is mainly Russia, the war in Ukraine, and/or cyber and air space violations, while other (Southern) EU member states are still focused on issues like migration and counter-terrorism. This divergence shapes what gets prioritised, notably why Ukraine and NATO-related issues dominate EUCO agendas.

This also highlights an internal EU tension between priorities which is **leading to new approaches**. EU interlocutors, in public spaces, say they are still focused on diplomacy and peace, though the focus is clearly on 1) support for Ukraine 2) support for EU member states' defence capabilities and industry, in order to reach the NATO commitments. Some departments aim to coin their thematic work as a defence issue to maintain relevance in this context (for example, in the 2023 Joint Communication on the Climate-Security Nexus there is a clear link between climate and defence; EC, 2023). Other parts of the European Commission are reportedly 'no longer interested in working on peace', with internal reflections on a reorganisation towards solely geographic units and an absorption of thematic expertise across these. Generally, considerable reorganisations are taking place in member state administrations too which might mirror or reinforce this trend.

The approach is shifting from Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions to narrower and more 'compact' security and defence initiatives with third countries, or security and defence partnerships with 'first tier' countries such as Japan (EEAS, 2024c), Canada (EEAS, 2025), India (EEAS, 2026a)and in March 2026 with Ghana (EEAS, 2026b)(see also below). Some interlocutors noted this is now a new rationale for (certain departments of) the EEAS to maintain a say in the defence and security policy, which falls much more squarely within member state competencies.

While the push towards an approach that is more based on hard security has accelerated in recent years, closer collaboration in the defence sector and a rethinking of security approaches already started in 2016, with the adoption of the Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy (EEAS, 2019). The European Peace Facility (EPF), a so-called off-budget[5] financing instrument formally established in March 2021 to be spent on support to conflict management and international security over a seven-year period, is the result of the ambitious Global Strategy. The EPF has become a primary instrument for the EU to act as a geopolitical and security actor, but so far its spending reflects the EU's priorities: since 2022, the EU and member states have mobilised €6.1 billion under the EPF for

[5] The fund is off-budget because the EU's legal base prohibits the use of its regular multiannual budget for activities of a military nature. Moreover, the decision on its final use is with EU member states.

military support delivery to Ukraine, while allocations to Africa amount to approximately €1.5 billion (Desmidt et al. 2025).[6]

Shifts in the geographic focus

Second, geographically, the attention has shifted from regions like the Global South to the Eastern Flank (though not exclusively and completely). As already mentioned, Ukraine and defence dominate EUCO agendas. Interviewees are aware that the EU cannot ignore the reality of a war 'next door', including explicit Russian threats and ongoing hybrid warfare. The Political and Security Committee (PSC),[7] another key platform to discuss EU peace and security priorities, focuses largely on the practical implementation of the EU's CSDP policy, for example the establishment of security and defence initiatives and partnerships. This reinforces the absence of dedicated discussions either on specific geographies outside of Europe, or conflict prevention and peacebuilding. This shift in geographic prioritisation has been seemingly formalised in EU member state policies. Belgium, for example, has made this explicit in its 'Strategic Defence Vision 2025' where Africa is no longer deemed a priority (La Défense, 2025).

However, applying a more compact model of security cooperation, the EU has worked with key West African countries to rebuild its influence and secure a region considered key for its southern defence perimeter, and even more valuable to its energy security (Africa Confidential, 2026). For an EU that has been looking to secure alternative energy supplies that don't include Russia, the **Gulf of Guinea** (which stretches for about 6,000 km of coastline from Senegal to Angola in West Africa) is a vital global trade corridor and has gained renewed interest (Aidoo, 2026) in particular after the European Council adopted a regulation on phasing out Russian gas imports (Council of the European Union, 2026). It's also seen as a buffer region to stem instability emanating from the Central Sahel. Already in December 2023, the EU launched the EU Security and Defence Initiative in support of West African countries of the Gulf of Guinea –an initiative under the EPF intended to keep a presence in the Gulf of Guinea region on security issues (EEAS, 2024b). Going a step further, and to ensure its stability and protect critical maritime trade routes, the EU has signed a security and defence partnership with Ghana in March 2026 (the first and only African country so far)(EEAS, 2026c), with Nigeria and potentially others to follow suit (Africa Confidential, 2026). The partnership also creates a dedicated annual EU–Ghana Security and Defence Dialogue. Much more than an EU-led initiative, this partnership signals the importance of Ghana as a key partner for the EU to prevent spillovers from a

[6] Official and aggregated figures of EPF to Africa are difficult to find. The number provided here is an approximation made by ECDPM.
[7] The Political and Security Committee is responsible for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy.

sharp deterioration of the security situation in the Sahel and West Africa (ASA, 2025). The agreement covers peacebuilding, crisis management, conflict prevention and mediation in addition to security and defence capacity building. In theory this offers entry points to cover a wider remit of peace and security efforts, though spending decisions, outputs and impacts will need to be assessed in due course.

From our interviews, the Sahel appears as a lingering 'strategic discomfort'. Interviewees noted an uneasy comparison between Ukraine and the Sahel, and perhaps other so-called 'theatres'. Europe's strategic autonomy and defence credibility are strongly linked to the conflict in Ukraine. But EU officials themselves raise a critical question: "If strategic autonomy [underspins EU credibility in] Ukraine, what about the [EU's engagement in the] Sahel?" Overall, the EU's reduced engagement in the Sahel, and other Global South regions, is acknowledged as problematic both by EU officials and EU member state representatives. Past military capacity and engagement there are seen as having contributed to EU influence and the absence of the EU in this region has diminished this influence. Some interviewees shared a sense of loss of credibility and diminished influence, abrupt disengagements, the absence of effective (peace and security) partnership and lack of strategic continuity in Africa more widely – all of which limit Europe's ability to work with partners to prevent threats like violent extremism.

Shifts in the narrative or conceptualisation of defence and peace

Third, there is a clear shift in narratives around peace and security. Deterrence is being actively framed as a necessary component of peace (see the EU Commission Joint Communication on Preserving Peace - Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030) (EC, 2025a), with the argument that **investment in deterrence and defence capabilities is an investment in peace**. This narrative presents two main risks: first, it risks weakening the case for dedicated peacebuilding funding and capacity, which are necessary to achieve sustainable peace, as the military alone cannot achieve this (see Finding 2). Many interviewees also referred to an understanding and acknowledgment of this risk among military actors. Second, there is a risk of blurring between **defence** and **deterrence**: conceptually they are different (see glossary for a reference), but deterrence relies on credibility, which in turn relies on defense investments, capabilities, public support and capacity to follow through (Monaghan et al. 2024). Deterrence also comes from a targets' expected resistance or resilience to attack, which rests on a range of defensive and socio-economic factors. As one workshop participant noted, "deterrence is not solely based on group strength or size, but on its cohesion."

Framing deterrence as a component of security may serve to justify the EU's growing emphasis on military spending and hard power. On the flipside, if deterrence would be understood as part of 'peace' and more specifically as part of conflict prevention, this could be an argument to invest in conflict prevention and social cohesion efforts, including from a whole-of society-perspective.

The reframing of deterrence is still fluid and informed by a number of factors that must be understood in light of an evolving threat landscape. Contemporary risks – particularly hybrid threats that blur the line between military and non-military domains – have exposed limitations in traditional defence postures and prompted calls to update Europe's military response. Within this context, **deterrence is actively reframed as a form of conflict prevention (for Europe) with stronger military posture seen as a prerequisite for peace (in Europe).** The underlying assumption is that if the EU cannot credibly defend itself, it cannot prevent war or negotiate 'from a position of strength'.

At the same time, **stakeholders express frustration** that 'deterrence' continues to be interpreted primarily through Cold War, kinetic ('boots on the ground') terms. While deterrence has clear military origins and constitutes one component of a broader security strategy, many argue that responding to today's threats requires a **broader understanding of security and deterrence**. With a view to reducing vulnerability to destabilisation, demoralisation, polarisation, and violent extremism, security and deterrence should include strengthening societal resilience, investing in education and wider socio-economic integration, safeguarding democratic institutions, and reinforcing inclusive governance and social cohesion. Sustaining deterrence over time therefore needs a whole-of-society approach. According to some, these broader dimensions and the new forms of warfare (hybrid) are largely neglected in current policy debates. As one EU member state representative noted, deterrence should be embedded in a 'whole-of-government' approach – one that complements military capabilities with diplomatic, economic, social and cultural instruments, thereby linking hard security objectives with a wider human security perspective.

Interlocutors shared that solely investing in the defence side risks misinterpreting signals, potentially leading partners to also increase defence and **signaling that peace is not the priority** (De Coning et al. 2025). On top of this, if the EU solely focuses on increasing its defence capabilities it risks underselling a much wider offer, including its role as a global actor which seeks to promote international stability (including global trade and economic resilience), international law,

multilateralism, democracy, human rights, climate factors and the overall promotion of effective international partnerships.[8]

But some interlocutors also surfaced a more fundamental question, given that the EU is legally bound to promote peace and security according to the EU treaty. The **EU has operated largely in times of peace** and is now improvising in a high-threat environment. Now that it is operating in a fundamentally different context, what kind of concept of *security* does the EU need?

Experts say the EU has entered a 'mature phase' and see the end of a 'soft-power-only' identity (Riddervold and Rieker, 2024). During our workshop on the 20 of March, experts noted that the renewed focus on defence is real and must be acknowledged. **Military deterrence becomes unavoidable**, but defence and peace are not sequential goals, and many note that in theory deterrence and diplomacy (which is often understood as including conflict prevention and mediation but often focuses on Track I diplomacy) must function together. Several interlocutors, across EU and member states also refer to the Cold War and how the **EU must remember the importance of dialogue**; as deterrence without diplomacy risks miscalculation.[9] The recent European recognition of de-escalation as the only viable approach around the conflict with and in Iran was highlighted as a sign that Europe can and must still play an important global diplomatic role.

For most interlocutors, credible military capacity is seen as essential for protecting EU citizens (from future attacks), sustaining political credibility (to its citizens and to other power centres), but also to enable the EU to act as a peace actor externally.

The latter remains largely theory and no examples resurfaced of where the EU combined military and political powers to sustain dialogue and promote peacebuilding in third countries. According to one interlocutor, Niger (or the Sahel) could have been an opportunity. The political decision not to engage in dialogue, not even through the military leadership of the CSDP mission then present in the country after the change of power in Niger caused the EU to lose "so much capital".

[8] Egmont and NRC, Expert discussion: Peace & security consequences of a global disengagement from Fragile and Conflict Affected Situations (FCAS), meeting report, April 2026.

[9] During the Cold War, NATO and European countries adopted the so-called Harmel Doctrine. This doctrine originated from the 1967 NATO Report on the Future Tasks of the Alliance authored by Belgian Foreign Minister Pierre Harmel. It established a dual-track framework for NATO: maintaining robust defense and deterrence while actively pursuing political détente and dialogue with the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact nations - notably to avoid miscalculation.

In sum, multiple people question whether the EU actually has a **clear, shared concept of security** suited to the current context. Workshop participants added that critical infrastructure, such as ports, logistics and other economic assets, including cyber networks and infrastructure, should be a clear part of security, as is social cohesion and civilian preparedness.

'Human security' appears in doctrines and some mission mandates, but it is not yet a serious operational or strategic reference point at EU level. "While CSDP has human security written in its civilian and military doctrines, it has never fully implemented it," noted one former EU official. There is no EU-wide definition that articulates how defence, resilience, human security, inclusive governance, and societal cohesion fit together in EU external action. An attempt at EU level was made through the integrated approach concept, as well as in the EU Global Strategy. However, in combination with shifting political priorities, the absence of institutional awareness, political will and or required capacity, the implementation of such an integrated or 'global security' approach has been weak or mixed at best (see Finding 2). This leads to fragmented policy choices, inconsistent country-level strategies, and tension between short-term stabilisation and long-term peacebuilding.

Finding 2.
The concepts of 'integrated approach' (more used by the EU) or '3D-approach' (Diplomacy, Defence, Development, more used by EU member states) are conceptually supported but deemed dysfunctional. Some interviewees continue to support their underlying rationale, but both concepts lack political drive in the EU and among EU member states. As such, attention for defence is not new but current policy and operational discussions have tilted the balance towards deterrence and defence priorities. This has reduced interest and political prioritisation for reviving past 3D/integrated approaches and concepts.

The discussion about the compatibility and/or integration of defence with development cooperation and peacebuilding is far from new. Over the past decades, the EU and its member states have aimed to shape and develop approaches that connect between the domains of security and peace. This was most often captured under the term '3D-approaches' (3D standing for Development-Diplomacy-Defence) or also 'integrated approach'. **Attempts to integrate defence, development and peace/diplomacy were far from easy and in many contexts imperfect**.

While conceptually supported, the integrated approach and the 3D-approach have weakened into bureaucratic concepts that are rarely operationalised

effectively, both at member state or EU level, suffering from structural competition (with other concepts) and an absence of conducive trust between actors across the 3D spectrum. The 2022 Strategic Compass for Security and Defence stressed the need to redouble EU efforts to implement the integrated approach to security, conflicts and crises (Council of the European Union, 2022). With some notable exceptions (for example the EU's engagement in Northern Mozambique and the renewed approach to the Sahel (Council of the European Union, 2025b); or statements around the conflict in Sudan (Council of the European Union, 2025a)), interviewees noted that the integrated approach is in reality **"no longer on the agenda"** or **"not talked about a lot"** in EU internal discussions.

These concepts are used interchangeably leading to conceptual confusion. Formalised in the 2016 Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy (EEAS, 2016) and then in the 2018 Council Conclusions on the Integrated Approach to External Conflicts and Crises (Council of the European Union, 2018), the integrated approach is more common at EU level. It provides a broad and comprehensive framework for the EU to deploy a combination of relevant policies and instruments (diplomatic, security and defence, development cooperation, peacebuilding, humanitarian aid, trade and financial tools) in its engagement in crises and conflict-affected contexts. The 3D-approach is mostly used at member state level (for example, it has been applied by the Dutch government in Afghanistan (Van der Lijn, 2016\), and the Belgian one in Niger (Enabel, n.d.)), and considers security to be multidimensional, calling for the three 'Ds' to combinely tackle security, governance and development in target areas. Both concepts essentially address the same issues: how can different instruments in the foreign policy toolbox be deployed in a more integrated manner, spanning trade, humanitarian aid, diplomacy, defence, development and (human) security.

At member state level, 3D initiatives have perhaps tended to focus more narrowly on defence, diplomacy, and development, in contrast to the EU's broader integrated approach, with member states applying the concept in varying ways.

At the EU level, the triple nexus (humanitarian-development-peace or HDP nexus) is another relevant concept, applied to push more joint-up approaches by EU and partners, though more focused perhaps on the operational and programming side (Veron and Hauck, 2021). The integrated approach is seen as a more macro-level political and institutional framework for EU external action in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Most interlocutors still subscribe to the rationale 'integrated approach', '3D' or 'whole-of-government' approaches, as well as the HDP nexus, but **interviewees describe current buy-in as weak, implementation largely personality-driven and in the current context, increasingly de-prioritised.**

Even when they were developed and tested, 3D structures existed on paper but were under-resourced and often sidelined when crises hit, replaced by ad-hoc, leader-driven coordination. In different contexts (such Afghanistan, Niger/Sahel and the Democratic Republic of the Congo), there have been serious attempts to design and implement 3D-approaches by EU member states – joint assessments, civil-military planning, integrated provincial teams – but **lessons were never fully institutionalised at EU level.** Sometimes lessons were even politically buried once missions became controversial. This was for example the case for the NATO mission in Afghanistan. Following the end of these missions, the comprehensive/integrated approach thinking has somewhat subsided, with the focus now on Ukraine and defence readiness. As a result, lessons learned from 3D were subsequently rarely applied.[10]

Several interlocutors noted that defence actions can undermine peace if it is used as a substitute for diplomacy and cooperation/peacebuilding instead of being part of a joint engagement. Nevertheless, experts shared that **the military itself is creating nuance in the debate, arguing they are the 'last resort' and that investment in addressing root causes of conflicts and fragility is necessary**. Former military personnel who served in integrated missions and operations, including in the Sahel and Afghanistan, for example, have advocated for investing in ODA, conflict prevention and peacebuilding, stressing that sustainable stability and peace cannot be achieved through military means alone.

Most military interlocutors presented defence and military actors as **enablers** for an operating environment for others to come in. Interlocutors in other sectors recognised how defense actors can support basic security, open access, provide protection and training, and engage in 'military diplomacy' with local forces and authorities, but reject a simple sequential framing, noting that peacebuilders and security forces are often engaging at the same time. Rather than applying a sequencing logic ('first the military, then the peacebuilders'), military actors and peacebuilders would benefit from an "interoperational" way of working, characterised by regular exchanges, sharing of information, and seeking each others' views and perspectives. Diplomatic actors should also be part of systematic and continuous exchanges between military, security, and peace actors. Military actors recognise that durable peace comes from conflict prevention, political settlements, governance reforms and social inclusion, psychosocial (trauma) support, as well as addressing the underlying root causes of conflict and fragility – areas where development, diplomacy and peacebuilders must lead.

[10] According to interlocutors this was done to a limited extent in Mali.

Past experiences show that any effort to integrate actions rely on high levels of trust and mutual understanding. Building this trust between defence (military), development actors, and peacebuilding (as well as humanitarian) organisations requires extensive time and effort, as **prejudices and a fear of contradicting mandates play a role**. For some interlocutors, civilian and peace actors (and to some extent also peacebuilders) are partly responsible for the ideological resistance and failure to proactively engage with military/defence actors. Military staff are now much more aware and ready to embrace 'human security' and dialogue.

Participants to our workshop quoted the **example of Ukraine, whose military heavily invested in protection of civilians and non-lethal support for society** (family aid and evacuation planning, among others). This is proving a key success factor in maintaining defense readiness and building resilience to destabilisation efforts. Despite limited funding, the Ukrainian military's success owes much to its high trust and close interactions with civilians.

Other past experiences from cooperation between military, civil (society) actors and peacebuilding organisations provide important lessons learned, and show that 'interoperational' relations between military and peacebuilding is not a given success. Two contexts in particular came up in key informant interviews, including the case of the Dutch engagement in Afghanistan (Van der Lijn, 2016) and Belgium's experience with 3D in Niger (Enabel, N.d.). In both contexts, **military staff were receptive to the human security concept and to sustained dialogue with civilian partners**. But three important lessons learned can be identified. First, military-civil-peacebuilding cooperation (only) works when it is deliberately designed around complementary roles, and with investments in networking. Second, local knowledge is indispensable, therefore working with local development and peacebuilding organisations is essential for critical insights for military actors - with the necessary conflict-sensitivity and risks related to exposure, independence and trust relations. Finally, durable stability depends on a broader human security lens. Past experience strongly suggests that military engagement can contribute to stability, but only when linked to political, developmental, and peacebuilding efforts that address the underlying drivers of fragility.

Defence actors recognise governance failure as a key driver of insecurity. They *want* clarity and guidance on conflict sensitivity. They often feel peacebuilders keep their distance for ideological reasons. One expert noted they perceived little nuance in the peace movement, highlighting the difference between constructive engagement (e.g. by diplomats) and strongly ideological positions that view "everything concerning defence is bad".

At the same time, some defence actors are reticent in engaging in discussions with other actors because the focus is primarily on building up their operational capabilities. Informants from military and defence sides repeatedly referred to the decades of underfunding in this sector, and the urgent need to modernise European military capabilities. At the same time, interlocutors from defence recognise that things have changed since the last arms race (Cold War), and that lessons from the peace sector should be integrated and should shape this new race we are living in.

Conversely, while the peacebuilding sector is now going through a defunding cycle, they also shared views that peacebuilding funding was insufficient prior to this already. According to estimates of the Global Public Policy Institute (Li et al. 2025), investment in peacebuilding and prevention fell to between $635 million and $845 million in 2023, returning to 2015 levels. Fragile settings are hit even harder: by 2023, ODA dedicated to peace fell to less than 10% of total aid to the most fragile countries (OECD, 2023), one of its lowest levels since 2004. In 2024, *global* military spending instead surged to a record $2.7 trillion (SIPRI, 2025), which according to the UN's Secretary General Antonio Guterres is almost 13 times the amount of ODA from the world's wealthiest nations (Guterres, 2025).

Finding 3.
Policy shifts around defence are messy given the split competencies across the EU, member states and NATO. The shift in defence is leading to a variety of new mechanisms, additional budgets but blurred lines of competencies and comparative advantage, especially for the EU. However, interviews show that member states, not the EU institutions, drive the imbalance, e.g. the tilt towards defence.

Multiple interviewees stress that the real centre of gravity for defence and security related issues is EU national capitals. EU instruments and strategies are often seen as reactive to member state priorities, dependent on their political willingness, and weakened when capitals pull back (e.g., Sahel disengagements). In practice, interlocutors suggested the EU is best placed to support 'complementary' actions such as supporting the development of a defence industrial base and championing the integrated approach. Hence, the challenge is not just inconsistent EU institutional design, but the lack of a shared political vision across member states toward integrated approaches across peace and defence.

Closer coordination with NATO is taking place, but EU officials said that while NATO is the provider for defence (including capabilities assessments, military standards and interoperability), the EU's added value remains its attempts to include development in the EU's offer, support diplomatic engagement, provide military

assistance and training (e.g., civilian CSDP missions) provide support to joint procurement (e.g. the Security Action for Europe loans, a new EU financial instrument) or support the military or defence industry. Still, interlocutors point to a **'very gray area'** for military infrastructure and services (see Box 1 for an example). An expert defines the EU's defence discussion as having high expectations in the EU bubble but resulting in various 'slush funds'.

Box 1. The European Peace Facility (EPF)

Interviewees shared that the EPF is creating a gray area between military support and peace operations, making the EU's overall strategic goal confusing for partners on the ground. Participants to our workshop highlighted that under the EPF, there's a "touch and go" mentality (deliver the equipment and leave) instead of the capacity building measures that require building partnerships with partners.

There is a widespread perception that **EPF and other defence tools are not systematically conflict-sensitive**, while our interviewees mention examples of how the EU could integrate its tools; with a reference to the post-coup context in Niger and possibly combination of CSDP mission and diplomatic efforts.

Moreover, several interviewees point to significant cuts or stagnation in peacebuilding budgets in recent years, including in the portfolio of the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments, with a clear shift towards hard security and instruments like the EPF, contributing to a – by most accounts, unintentional – decreased attention and resources for peacebuilding work vis-a-vis security focused interventions.

On top of this, key informants presented a rather messy picture of the current EU coordination and integration, and in particular the EEAS' role. On the one hand, the EEAS is viewed as currently **"dysfunctional to bring security and defence together,"** exemplified by internal competition between key divisions (peace and security, and the defence and strategic side) but also between EEAS, Commission (FPI, DG International Partnerships (DG INTPA), etc.) and member states, who ultimately decide on capabilities and are politically cautious about ceding ground. In these key informant's views, defence, security and peace actors operate in **'stovepipes'**, leading to a dynamic where collaboration does not happen spontaneously. Other interviews suggested that, from within the EEAS, the defence–peace relationship is increasingly framed as one of sequencing and complementarity rather than competition — while also exposing the political limits of translating this logic into budgets, mandates and inclusive practice.

The need therefore remains to improve coordination and division of labour between EEAS, DG INTPA, DG MENA, DG ENEST and member state ministries – but our findings are clear on describing how decisions on security and defence projects are heavily political, with limited room to negotiate once priorities are set. Experts note that **EU early warning, conflict prevention and mediation tools have been strengthened**, but require better coherence with defence efforts and more funding. Some member states, including France, Italy, and the Netherlands, are even (re-)investing in mediation capacity in order to balance their toolbox better, though with limited reflection on truly bridging mediation, wider peacebuilding, defence, and related capacities.

Analysts consulted for this paper have expressed worry that **the EU's defence industry expansion will pressure the EU to export more arms.** In this scenario there is a need to embed international humanitarian law, due diligence and responsible arms policy in EU assistance, including under the EPF, more consistently and systematically. As a report by the Flemish Peace Institute notes, the (global) defence industry has long operated under the assumption that government regulation and voluntary action with regards to arms control would be sufficient. But at the moment, these initiatives fall short of what is required according to international due diligence standards and in terms of the emerging legislation. Other sectors struggle with this too, including technology, diamonds and non-energy extractives (Verbrugge et al 2025).

In 2023, the EU approved the EU human rights and international humanitarian law due diligence policy (EU HRDDP) on security sector support to third parties, offering an overarching risk management framework to identify, assess, and mitigate human rights risks associated with security sector support provided by the EU via CFSP and CSDP instruments. Its implementation however, according to one expert, has languished. Experts worry that since arms export remains a national competence, and that arms companies exercise a powerful influence, the EU is not in a position to enforce effective weapons and arms control, and that member states might not be (always) willing to exercise due diligence. A starting point for this would be to prioritise the practical implementation of the 2023 EU HRDDP policy on security sector support to third parties. This would require viewing the policy as a core component of any support measure, not a human rights 'add-on', and investing the necessary human and financial resources in appropriate analysis, design adaptations, accompanying measures, monitoring, and follow-up.

3. Opportunities and openings

The new EU Security Strategy and the next MFF will be key junctures opportunities for the EU to make strategic choices to (better) connect peace, defence and deterrence.

First, in the next MFF negotiation process there is concern that "new facts on the ground" create risky precedents: once defence-heavy structures and narratives are locked in, they are very hard to re-balance. At the same time, the potential of soft power (and trust in international cooperation) is significantly decreasing due to drastic cuts to ODA (Sherriff, 2026), which in 2025 fell by 23.1% (according to preliminary data), amounting to the largest annual contraction recorded in the history of ODA (OECD, 2026). Critically, the (current proposal for the) next MFF will no longer include earmarking for conflict prevention and peacebuilding under the Global Europe Instrument (GEI) (Jones, 2025).

Second, the EU Commission is also focusing on writing a new EU security strategy, which is to be expected to be presented before the July 2026 NATO summit in Ankara (Ionta, 2026). Several workshop participants reflected on the strong rationale to develop such a strategy at a critical moment but warned it might become a hasty process. One participant noted that the new strategy process is being driven quite rapidly and mainly by the Commission, rather than the member states, opening to the possibility of "blind spots" (meaning focusing mostly -or only- on the most visible threats). If rushed, the strategy process may leave member states feeling sidelined, with little political ownership, which is instead key as member states should see the new strategy as providing overall direction for their own national strategies (Biscop, 2026). Another participant warned that there is a real risk that the EU security strategy replaces the EU global strategy. If (hard) security swallows the global strategy (diplomacy/aid), it could lead to a narrow, militarised EU foreign policy.

In this context, the research conducted and discussions during the workshop point to a few opportunities for the EU for the EU and member states to seize:

- **Clarify the EU's narrative and definition of peace: the EU is moving from being a peace actor that has mostly operated in peace time, to an actor that wants to ensure 'peace through deterrence'.** The EU would benefit from a more explicit political narrative that:
    - Affirms the EU as a *peace* actor (as per the Treaties) while acknowledging the role of hard defence and NATO complementarity.
    - Frames defence and deterrence, resilience, conflict prevention and peacebuilding, and human security as mutually reinforcing and

complementary, not competing agendas, which are needed in parallel – not in a sequence.
    - The upcoming EU security strategy might be a good entry point for this. Workshop participants highlighted it will be important to include an expanded understanding of security and societal resilience, one that includes economic and infrastructural assets like ports and cyber-networks. Participants were aware that there is little room to influence the strategy development, but urged the new security strategy to explicitly include human security.
- **Use defence build-up as leverage for better standards (do no harm)**: As defence budgets and instruments grow, there is a window of opportunity for the EU to **strengthen conflict sensitivity and peace criteria and/or accompanying measures,** building on the accumulated experience of conducting conflict analysis screenings:
    - **Make conflict sensitivity assessments and due diligence non-negotiables in defence-related external action:**
        - A key recommendation is to establish and enforce **conflict sensitivity screenings or assessments) as a minimum criterion** that must be included in **any kind of defence-related actions**
        - Develop **sector-specific guidance and training** on conducting aligned conflict sensitivity assessments for defence planners, purchasers and disbursers (EPF, CSDP, DG DEFIS) in cooperation with peacebuilding organisations that already do such due diligence.
    - Concerning defence spending and arms exports the EU and member states should invest and improve its transparency and accountability measures, possibly through parliamentary oversight and public data - and certainly not loosen control and oversight at this critical juncture.
- **Move from ad-hoc consultations to regular, structured dialogue as well as working relationships** on security and defence that include peacebuilders and local voices. Interviewees suggested that the peacebuilding community, peace and defence actors, and policymakers across peace, security and defence fields must focus less on perfecting integrated doctrines and more on establishing operational low-profile relationships.
    - Some interlocutors argue strongly for expanding deterrence beyond the military: education, culture, integration, minority rights and democratic resilience are themselves deterrents against aggression, violence and radicalisation. There is a growing interest in whole-of-society security.

    - However, this would need to be balanced to avoid a securitisation or 'militarisation' of these domains. Common ground would need to be sought with a range of areas where peacebuilding organisations are already active such as education (peace education), polarisation and forging resilience (social cohesion and community dialogues) and could harness working relationships across domains and sectors.
    - In addition, to seek ways to encourage coherence across EU internal agendas on internal resilience (societal cohesion inside the EU) with EU and EU Member State external action (support to inclusive politics and rule of law in partner countries).
- **Redefining roles, approaches and networks to enhance complementarity and mutual understanding:** As the balance between peace and defence shifts, actors are adapting their roles and networks. Defence and peacebuilders operate on different but interdependent dimensions of security - pointing to the need to strengthen 'interoperationability'. To achieve this:
    - Peacebuilders focus on **peacebuilding and mediation, addressing the underlying conflict dynamics and relational space between actors** –but they must adapt their approach and proactively increase their understanding and engage in the planning divisions and operational areas of defence and security actors, to remain relevant in a defence-driven environment.
    - Military actors focus on immediate threats. If **military actors are convinced that 'they can not do it all', they must open up channels of dialogue and collaboration with non-military actors,** who play important roles in security related fields, such as prevention of extremist violence, societal resilience, hybrid threats, etc.
    - Diplomacy must assume the **overall umbrella coordinating** role.
- In the upcoming MFF debate, several see scope to:
        - Secure space for 'global threats / resilience' windows that keep prevention and peace visible.
        - Make conflict sensitivity (assessments) and prevention a **cross-cutting requirement** across instruments, including those funding defence industry and capabilities.
        - Use evidence of impact (e.g. Cabo Delgado, West Africa coastal support) to argue that integrated approaches deliver both security and peace dividends.

Glossary

Defence	In official European Union (EU) and NATO joint doctrines, defence is defined as a reactive and protective enterprise aimed at maintaining the security status quo against external disruption. It encompasses the policies and actions necessary to protect the EU through collective resistance. This posture is fundamentally defensive in nature, and focuses on the mitigation of harm and the restoration of sovereignty once a breach has occurred.
Deterrence	Deterrence seeks to prevent aggression by convincing an adversary that the costs will outweigh any potential gains, either because their objectives cannot be achieved (resting on a potentially broad range of defensive and resilience measures) or because retaliation would be too costly. On the retaliation side, effective deterrence depends on the credibility of this threat (namely, the perceived offensive capability and willingness to act) combined with reassurance that restraint will not be punished.
Peacebuilding	Peacebuilding is the process of preventing violent conflicts and their recurrence by addressing both immediate triggers and root causes such as injustice, inequality, and social exclusion, while promoting nonviolent dispute resolution and strengthened governance. This includes dialogue, mediation, reconciliation, and support for normative, economic, and institutional frameworks that uphold rights, inclusion, peaceful relations, and accountability.
Security	In the EU, "security" is not defined by a single, static legal term. Instead, it is divided into distinct categories across the Treaty on EU (TEU) and the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, reflecting the balance between member state sovereignty and collective action. Under Article 4(2) TEU, "national security remains the sole responsibility of each Member State". While the treaties do not explicitly define it, the Court of Justice of the European Union interprets it as the protection of the state's essential functions, fundamental interests of society, and prevention of activities that could seriously destabilise its constitutional or social structures (e.g., terrorism). Defined in Articles 21 to 46 TEU, the Common Foreign and Security Policy outlines the EU's role as a global security provider. There, the objective is stated as preserving peace, strengthening international security, and promoting international cooperation. As such, the EU defines security as a comprehensive and multidimensional framework centered on protecting the Union's territory, citizens, and democratic values from both conventional military and evolving 'hybrid' threats - but also with an external component.

	The 2022 Strategic Compass for Security and Defence integrates military readiness with strategic autonomy, emphasising the EU's ability to act independently in domains such as cyber, space, and maritime security. Furthermore, under the Security Union Strategy (2020-2025), the definition encompasses economic resilience and the protection of critical infrastructure.
Human security	Human security refers to the security of individuals and communities, shifting the focus from state-centric defense to protecting individual well-being. It addresses serious threats ranging from violence, genocide, and slavery to natural disasters and massive violations of rights related to food, health, and housing. Conceptually, it serves as a 'bridge concept' between immediate crisis stabilisation and long-term structural assistance. Reflected in EU strategic documents and embedded in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, human security advances a multilateral, rights-based, and civil–military approach.
Conflict prevention	Conflict prevention is a strategy or approach based on the premise that violent conflicts can be prevented before they break out, or that their scope and impact can be reduced. It encompasses actions taken at all stages of a crisis, working to prevent the eruption (e.g. working on underlying 'root causes'), escalation, and re-occurrence of violence.
Hybrid threats	Hybrid threats are coordinated actions by state or non-state actors using a mix of military and non-military means below the threshold of war to exploit vulnerabilities and undermine social, economic, or governance systems. Those threats pose an increasingly central security challenge for Europe that requires cross-sectoral resilience and response.
3D approach (Diplomacy, Defence, Development)	A conceptual framework used to describe the need for coherent action across defence, diplomacy and development in crises and conflict-affected contexts. It stems from the idea that security is complex and needs multidimensional answers, hence the three 'Ds' are combined to tackle security, governance, dialogue and development in target areas.
Integrated approach	Originally formalised in the 2018 Council Conclusions on the Integrated Approach to External Conflicts and Crises, and previously included in the 2016 Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy, the integrated approach is a comprehensive framework for an holistic EU engagement in in conflict-affected and crisis contexts. It seeks to ensure that the EU deploys all relevant policies and instruments (diplomatic, security and defence, development cooperation, peacebuilding, humanitarian aid, trade and financial tools) in a coordinated, complementary and context-specific manner throughout the entire conflict cycle, from prevention and early response to stabilisation and long-term peacebuilding.

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