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The EU's preventive diplomacy - practice makes (not yet) perfect

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Ten years after the establishment of the European External Action Service, discussions are still ongoing about the lack of a single voice related to the EU's external policy and the European Union's global role[1]. Political leaders have still not found the visionary approach to start building that railroad to prevent conflicts, to fully align and act as a caretaker of the tragedies that we are facing in this volatile world.

The global order is changing rapidly. Emerging powers are confronting the traditional players. New technologies and further globalisation are leading to increased international competition. Together with climate change, food security and migration, these are just a few factors that have caused rising tensions and led to conflicts across the world which are also challenging the EU. With the Russian aggression against Ukraine, a war at the bloc's eastern border is directly threatening the security of the entire European continent. If the European Union wants to maintain its economic and diplomatic strength globally, it needs to rethink its foreign policymaking and invest more in the prevention of these challenges.

As a Member of the European Parliament, I have been appointed as rapporteur for "[the role of preventive diplomacy in tackling frozen conflicts around the world, missed opportunity or change for the future](#)". In this role, I have drafted a set of recommendations on how the EU can improve its preventive actions. To be able to provide a constructive contribution, it is important to look back at how the EU has dealt with conflicts in the past.

For years, European leaders have been discussing the EU's preventive diplomacy. The Treaty of Lisbon states that the EU's policies aim to "*preserve peace, prevent conflicts and strengthen international security*". The [EU Global Strategy](#) (2016) presents a detailed overview of

the principles behind the EU's preventive policies. With the [Strategic Compass](#) adopted in March 2022, the leaders of the European Member States recognise that the bloc needs to double its efforts to implement an integrated approach to security, conflicts and crises. Despite these reflections, recent events have shown that the current preventive measures are often far from sufficient.

EU SUPPORT SEEMS TO BE REPLACEABLE

In March 2022, the European Union decided to suspend its combat training mission in Mali. The mission was established in 2013 and trained over 18,000 Malians. Shortly after, "Barkhane", the French anti-terrorist mission in the Sahel, was also officially terminated and the French-led mission of EU special forces in Mali "Takuba" ceased its activities. The end of this military support was caused by the consequences of the two coups in Mali that left the effective control of the country in the hands of a military junta.

Despite a decade of military and diplomatic support, the G5-Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) could not cope with the increasing reach of jihadist organisations and the continued attacks against military and civilian targets. The deteriorating situation in Mali has created discontent with European efforts and has, in combination with an influx of strategic anti-European disinformation, nudged the de facto leaders to search for other solutions to ensure

[1] This text was originally published in "[The Schuman Report on Europe, the State of the Union 2023](#)" editions Marie B, Paris, May 2023. It has been updated.

the country's security, which they found in the Russian paramilitary organisation, the Wagner Group. This organisation with direct ties to the Kremlin is upping its presence across the African continent and is engaged in other conflicts such as Mozambique, the Central African Republic and Libya. The suspension of the European mission and the Malian pivot to cooperate with Russian mercenaries is a failure of the EU's preventive diplomacy in Africa. Looking at the causes of this development, critics refer to a lack of finances and general interest on the part of European Member States to engage in the Sahel.

It is however important to note that the internal security of the EU is linked to security abroad and preventive diplomacy should happen both inside and outside our European borders. What happens in the Sahel can have consequences for the EU. Terror and violence make people move. Look at the many refugees from warzones who seek safer places to live. With a worsening security situation in the Sahel, people across North Africa will decide to find a better future in other regions, including in Europe. With migration to the EU reaching the same levels as during the crisis in 2015 and without the required reform in the European asylum and migration legislation, additional flows of migrants are likely to raise political instability.

UNDERSTANDING THE LOCAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

The American decision to call its forces back from Afghanistan compelled the international community to follow suite, including the EU. For twenty years, the European Union has shown its solidarity with the US and contributed to state-building and democracy assistance in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, progress lacked pace and did not prevent the Taliban taking over the country even as the chaotic evacuation was still underway.

I participated in the parliamentary mission to Tajikistan in March 2022. We discussed with the authorities how they were coping with the massive influx of Afghan refugees and how a food crisis was leaving 14 million people in a state of starvation. These developments

raise questions on how effective the efforts of the international community have been over the last two decades. What we learned is that there was a lack of coordination and a mutual approach between EU Member States. They were often working in parallel in different regions of Afghanistan, rather than combining their capabilities.

Another lesson that can be learned from the EU's engagement in Afghanistan is that the international community focused too much on building a centralised democracy, while paying less attention to the development of rural areas. It is important that all international state-building assistance be tailored to the cultural and local context of the country where it will be implemented and should be regularly updated. Viola Fee Dreikhausen describes it in her ISS analysis "[the EU engagement in Afghanistan](#)" as follows:

- It is essential for international actors to understand the cultural, historical and political context of the territories in which they engage, as a premise to developing common strategic responses. Rigorous, detailed and continued political analysis is needed to adapt international responses to the shifting realities on the ground. To this end, international actors must prioritise information systems that are designed to identify and challenge prevailing assumptions and capture negative signals. To render these systems effective, the EU should consider introducing varied policy reviews at regular, operationally meaningful intervals. -

There have been other occasions when the European Union has failed to keep the cultural, historical and social context of a country in mind while assisting countries with state-building efforts, such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Dayton Paris Peace Agreement, which lays down the foundations for a peaceful functioning of the state, recognizes the existence of three constituent peoples (Croats, Serbs and Bosniaks) and outlines their respective rights and representation, including in the Presidency of the country. Over the years, changes have been made to the electoral law, stepping away from the principles of Dayton and

disenfranchising the Croat-majority community, as well as the minority communities. The legal changes have allowed other communities, mostly Bosniak, to elect their representatives, thereby undermining the participation of Croats and others affiliated with them in shared governance. This loss of equal representation due to interventions in the electoral law by High Representatives over the years, has made Croats and most minorities second class citizens in the country. Even those seats reserved for the minorities, such as Jewish and Roma population, are filled by Bosniak representatives, which is an abuse of the provision of the equal representation.

A recent breakthrough occurred, not because of the mediation efforts on the part of the EU, but by the intervention of High Representative Schmidt. He demonstrated his understanding of the disadvantaged position of the third constituent community, and decided to use his Bonn Powers after the October 2022 elections to impose changes that partially correct the aforementioned inequities. The United States, which played a crucial role in crafting the Dayton Paris peace agreement, applauded the intervention. In addition, the United Kingdom, perhaps due to its appreciation of the [Good Friday Agreement](#), also came in to uphold the peace deal and has commended the Schmidt decision. The European Union however, due to internal disagreement, was hesitant in expressing its support.

FROM STRATEGIC SOVEREIGNTY TO PREVENTIVE DIPLOMACY

Over the last decades, the EU has relied on strategic dependencies in sensitive interests such as security and energy. Historically, the EU's security has been preserved via the cooperation with NATO and the EU's transatlantic allies. For its energy, the EU Member States has until recently relied largely on the import of Russian resources. This has changed dramatically since the Russian invasion in Ukraine and the EU's sanctions against these atrocities which have led to the search for energy diversification. Also, regarding security matters, the EU's leaders are looking for more strategic sovereignty and less dependency. This perspective gained ground when the Trump administration started

openly questioning its cooperation with its international partners. Enhanced strategic autonomy will positively affect the EU's ability in terms of preventive diplomacy. By gaining strength and self-sufficiency, the EU will increase its standing and geopolitical leverage in conflict prevention.

The war in Ukraine however has shown that it is still only with the assistance of the USA that the EU can cope with acute major security threats. The EU Member States acknowledge the necessity to ramp up their foreign policies, but fail to harmonize their efforts. Tools and platforms are being created, but they are missing their target. The Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) is an initiative encouraging Member States to join forces in defence procurement and common military mobility. Unfortunately, the current engagement and coherence between pending projects does not cover the initiative's full potential. Instead of collectively sharing the burden and expenses to upscale defence capacities, Member States still prefer to invest individually and maintain parallel defence structures.

This lack of cohesion and harmonisation shows that there is not enough courage to undertake action as the EU. This limits the internal motivation to be the protagonist of peace making or mediating around the world. While the EU is the biggest sponsor of the United Nations, covering 30% of the organisation's costs and 33% of the expenses of UN Peace keeping missions, the EU lacks the passion to take the lead on the ground.

By examining the experience of frozen conflicts on its doorstep and its attempts at mediation, notably in Africa, the Western Balkans, Nagorno-Karabakh, Cyprus, North Ireland, Afghanistan and Ukraine, the European Union should learn from past missed opportunities and avoid similar situations in the future. In particular, the EU should constantly assess and analyse risk factors and adapt its actions in conflict regions to avoid creating a situation that would not be in the European Union's interest.

The European Union must strengthen its strategic autonomy in order to be seen as a strong player in

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preventive diplomacy. This can only be achieved if it speaks with a single voice and if its action on the ground is aligned with that of its Member States, in terms of early warning, conflict prevention and crisis management, in order to deliver better results.

It also needs to do a better job of communicating its achievements and successes. Despite being the world's largest donor of development aid, the results of this investment in public diplomacy are almost insignificant.

While the European Union could acquire the means to be a leading actor in conflict prevention and resolution worldwide, its actions have often missed their goal. From the examples listed in this article, it is clear that the main obstacle for EU's global leadership in preventive diplomacy lies with the lack of will on the

part of the Member States to step away from their individual interests in external relations and build together in terms of joint capacity. In addition, the EU's external actions regarding development or state-building often lack the understanding of the local and cultural context in the countries where these actions are implemented. The Russian aggression against Ukraine has certainly been a wakeup call for many decision-makers and has served as a catalyst for a stronger foreign and security policy. Only by joining forces, will the EU and its member States be able to overcome the pitfalls described above and generate a more successful interventionist approach.

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