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## EU Conflict Prevention Revisited

### The New European External Action Service

#### Summary

- So far the European Union has not operated as the leading actor on prevention that it aims to be. The recent launch of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in December 2010 could present a breakthrough in this regard.
- Most of the existing prevention instruments will be relocated to the new Service. A tentative organogram of the EEAS also reveals the establishment of a Directorate for Conflict Prevention and Security Policy.
- It remains to be seen whether this institutional innovation can address the challenges that have constrained the EU's role in prevention so far, including the EU's coherence, consensus, conceptual clarity and ambition.

#### Introduction

The European Union highlighted conflict prevention as a strategic priority following the 1999 war in Kosovo and the emergence of the human security paradigm in the 1990s. Its capacity to reduce tensions or manage violent conflict has strengthened significantly since. The Union has transformed from an inward-looking project aimed at internal economic and political stability into a serious player in international affairs. Yet, so far the EU has not operated as the leading actor on prevention that it aims to be. The launch of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in December 2010, an EU foreign ministry and diplomatic corps in development, could present a breakthrough in this regard, allowing the organization to act upon its commitments.

Its broad range of instruments, financial largesse and image of a benevolent soft power allow the EU to lead prevention activities from sub-Saharan Africa to the Arctic Ocean and from Central Asia to Morocco. With a seven-year budget of \$2.59 billion for its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), an Instrument of Stability worth over \$3 billion for a seven year-period<sup>1</sup>, and \$80 billion of development aid available within the EU and member states combined in 2010, the EU's financial capacity to prevent conflict is unrivaled.<sup>2</sup> Its prevention toolbox includes conflict-sensitive development assistance, trade and environmental policy instruments, as well as economic, diplomatic and military tools for crisis management.

While institutionally the EU may thus appear to be a prevention giant, its operational visibility has remained relatively low. The Union faces coordination problems, remains confused about conflict prevention as a concept and lacks decisiveness due to occasional divergences among

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its 27 member states. The EU also continues to punch below its weight, limiting itself to less controversial low-risk missions within a limited geographic area.

This brief describes the EU's growing dedication to conflict prevention; assesses the anticipated impact of the new Service on EU prevention activities; and sets out the remaining challenges for the EU's potential role in resolving conflicts outside EU borders.

### *Prevention on the EU Agenda: From Göteborg to Lisbon*

The EU embodies the potential of regional integration as a structural conflict prevention approach, spreading political and economic stability across the old continent. The soft power combination of its socioeconomic appeal, accession criteria, stabilization and association agreements, and neighborhood policy stabilized most of the southern and eastern parts of Europe. But the 1999 war in Kosovo served as a reality check for Europe's inability to manage crises, even in its own backyard.

Shortly after the Kosovar War, the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, the European Commission and the European Council each issued a policy paper<sup>3</sup> in an effort to develop a comprehensive EU conflict prevention policy. The final document, the 2001 Göteborg Programme, represented a political commitment to pursue prevention as a key objective of the EU's external relations. The Programme emphasized the distinction between structural or long-term prevention, and direct prevention or crisis-management, and was followed by the adoption of conflict prevention as a strategic priority in the 2003 European Security Strategy.

These commitments spurred the creation of new prevention tools. Prevention was gradually "mainstreamed" into EU development, trade and enlargement policies. With the creation of the European Security and Defense Policy in 1999, now called the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), the Union also acquired new instruments for crisis management. The EU sent out EU Special Representatives to unstable countries and regions, and became involved in electoral assistance activities, peacekeeping and rescue tasks. A significant development was the creation of the Rapid Response Mechanism in 2001 to allow for quick, short-term and primarily civilian responses to crisis situations. In 2007, this Mechanism was transformed into the *Instrument for Stability* (IfS), a €2 billion instrument that is central to the EU capacity for conflict prevention. IfS funds have been used for a variety of projects, including peacekeeping in Chad and Darfur, electoral assistance in Bolivia and Moldova, and assistance to displaced populations in Georgia and Lebanon.<sup>4</sup> Since the EU Battlegroup concept reached full operational capability in 2007, the EU became able to undertake two concurrent single battalion-sized (about 1,500-strong) rapid response operations.<sup>5</sup>

These instruments allowed the EU to play a vital role as a peace broker defusing tensions in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) in 2001, or through its involvement in development and democratization programs in West Africa. To date, a total 28 civilian and military EU missions have been deployed, some of which effectively contributed to the prevention or resolution of violent conflict. Yet, these operations are generally limited in size and mandate. So far the EU's impressive institutional and financial capacity has not been reflected in its operational decisiveness.

### *Preventing Conflict and the New European External Action Service*

The Lisbon Treaty, signed in 2007 by member states after an arduous negotiation process, was aimed at further integrating the Union and adjusting its institutional structure to the EU's recent enlargement, adding 12 additional member states. The creation of a new EEAS in December 2010 under the leadership of High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Baroness Catherine Ashton, was prescribed in the Treaty to increase the visibility, coherence and effectiveness of the EU's

foreign policy. The EEAS will initially consist of a diplomatic corps of about 1,200 personnel, and will combine and enhance the external action programs that had been scattered throughout the various EU institutions. The Service can draw from a broad range of policy fields, combine national and supranational resources, and apply both civilian and military instruments. With just several months since its inception, it may take two more years until this latest addition to the EU's bureaucracy will be fully in service.

Conflict prevention was explicitly stated as a key purpose of the Union's external action. The operational leverage of the EEAS will be crucial for the EU's prevention capacity as it combines various security, development, migration and crisis management tools. It was long uncertain whether the EU would continue its "silver thread approach" and mainstream prevention or whether Ashton would opt for a vanguard office within the EEAS concentrating and coordinating prevention activities. The existing prevention instruments will be relocated to the new Service, including the IfS, the prevention, crisis response and peacebuilding units, and the CSDP structures. A tentative organogram of the EEAS distributed by Ashton also revealed the establishment of a Directorate for Conflict Prevention and Security Policy, and within it a Peacebuilding, Conflict Prevention and Mediation Unit. This Directorate is tasked with programming parts of the IfS and providing conflict analysis and support to the regional Directorates within the Service.<sup>6</sup>

The Directorate could develop into a vanguard office with dedicated focus on prevention, similar to the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) within the U.S. Department of State. Creating a separate prevention champion will reduce the chance of relevant Directorates merely paying lip service to the prevention mandate of the EEAS. But it remains to be seen whether this institutional innovation can address the challenges that have constrained the EU's role in prevention so far, including the EU's coherence, consensus, conceptual clarity and ambition:

**Coherence.** Prior to the Lisbon Treaty, most of the EU's prevention capacity was scattered throughout the institutions. The EU also suffered from vertical inconsistency between the Union and the national level, and long-term structural prevention efforts were poorly coordinated with crisis management activities. The EEAS should be able to streamline the fragmented and complex EU decision-making procedures in external affairs. Unfortunately, several relevant policy areas will not be coordinated by Ashton, including the EU's trade, development and enlargement policies. It is also unclear whether the new prevention Directorate will be linked to other prevention-related parts of the EEAS, in particular the crisis prevention structures. But the details of the announced structure are still subject to change.

**Consensus.** At times the member states experienced difficulties in reaching a consensus on sensitive foreign policy issues. Since member states are reluctant to surrender national sovereignty in their external affairs, most decisions under the Common Foreign and Security Policy are still taken at the intergovernmental level. Setting up an external relations pillar will not rule out disagreements. But the new position of Herman Van Rompuy as president of the European Council may smooth the decision-making procedures and overcome some of the ideological divergences. However, despite a number of highly publicized disagreements on controversial issues, member states generally reach a consensus on most issues.

**Conceptual Clarity.** The EU also needs to clarify its conceptual understanding of conflict prevention. EU directives, policy papers and statements by senior EU officials on prevention, as well as the EU's organizational structure, reveal high levels of conceptual conflation between conflict prevention, crisis management and peacebuilding. The EU experiences difficulties distinguishing its prevention efforts from its work on human rights protection or development. Both at the EU and member state level, prevention instruments are too often applied reactively. Individual member states have also inappropriately labeled some of their work on post-conflict reconstruction

or counter-radicalization in former colonies as conflict prevention. Given its preference for early economic and political approaches, the EU also risks falling into the “trap of comprehensiveness.”<sup>7</sup> The comment of one EU official, convinced that “All we do is conflict prevention,” exemplifies the validity of this concern. Human rights promotion, development, and capacity building often contribute to prevention strategies. But to qualify as conflict prevention, these actions need to include preventing large-scale violence explicitly among their goals.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, those strategies aimed at preventing tensions before the outbreak of large-scale violence, also known as primary prevention, are preferable in moral, strategic and financial terms.

**Ambition.** So far the Union’s operational impact has not reflected the recent growth of its prevention capacity. The geographic scope of EU prevention activities and its willingness to use capabilities for prevention purposes have so far been limited. As Reinhardt Rummel points out, “The EU talks abundantly about its particular assets, but it forgets to use them.”<sup>9</sup> The EU is also criticized for its eagerness to free-ride militarily on the back of its ultimate security guarantor, the United States. As a political organization with its roots in economic integration the EU remains reluctant to discuss military options. Perhaps the recent proposal to send two EU Battle Groups into Libya to assist the relief efforts indicates a first step toward more ambitious and assertive EU prevention operations.

### *The Road Ahead: The EU in Need of Strategic Prioritization*

The EEAS may address a number of challenges that so far undermined EU prevention efforts. Although the new Service was launched almost half a year ago, it is still far from operational and the immediate changes will likely be institutional rather than programmatic. With the Lisbon Treaty, the EU focused on revamping its external representation, prioritizing form over content.<sup>10</sup> The EU will also need an external action strategy that reflects the institutional innovations and sets out clear strategic priorities. Prevention advocates are hoping for an important signal from Ashton in June 2011, when she provides a review report of the Göteborg Programme that evaluates the EU support for prevention activities.

The EU will need to (re-)define its interests and strategic priorities. So far, its prioritization has been dictated by the geographic and thematic interests of individual member states. The priorities of the EEAS should reflect the interests of the Union and its closest allies, as well as the needs of the country or region at risk. This would lead to an expansion of policy initiatives outside its immediate neighborhood and former colonies, and a more upstream preventive approach.

## Endnotes

1. From 2007 until 2013.
2. European Union. “Publication of Preliminary Data on Official Development Assistance 2010”, MEMO/11/221, Brussels, April 6, 2011; “The Role of the EU in Conflict Prevention”, Background Note of Parliamentary Meeting on “The Future of Europe: from reflection to action”, December 4-5, 2006, Brussels, p. 3.
3. A Joint Report of the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the EU Commissioner for Foreign Relations (November 2000); a Communication of the European Commission on Conflict Prevention (April 2001); and the EU Programme for the Prevention of Violent Conflicts, also known as the Göteborg Programme (June 2001).
4. European Commission. “2009 Annual Report from the European Commission on the Instrument for Stability”, SEC (2010) 1114, September 28, 2009, p. 4.

## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Jonas Claes is a program specialist in USIP's Center for Conflict Management. This Peace Brief follows a series of interviews conducted with senior EU officials in Brussels, and examines the anticipated impact of the new European External Action Service on EU prevention activities.

5. European Union. "EU Battlegroups", EU Council Secretariat Press, September 2010, pp. 1-2.
6. European Peacebuilding Liaison Office. "Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Inside the EEAS", EPLO Statement, February 21, 2011. Available at [http://www.eplo.org/assets/files/2.%20Activities/Working%20Groups/EEAS/EPLO\\_Statement\\_EEAS\\_Feb2011.pdf](http://www.eplo.org/assets/files/2.%20Activities/Working%20Groups/EEAS/EPLO_Statement_EEAS_Feb2011.pdf).
7. The 'trap of comprehensiveness' refers to the idea that, when a term widens conceptually, it becomes operationally useless.
8. Lawrence Woocher. "Preventing Violent Conflict: Assessing Progress, Meeting Challenges", USIP Special Report, September 2009, p. 2.
9. Reinhardt Rummel. "The EU's Involvement in Conflict Prevention- Strategy and Practice", in Vincent Kronenberger and Jan Wouters (Eds.), *The European Union and Conflict Prevention: Policy and Legal Aspects*, (The Hague, the Netherlands: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2004): p. 92.
10. Edith Drieskens and Louise van Schaik. "Clingendael Input Paper", in Edith Drieskens and Louise van Schaik (Eds.) *The European External Action Service: Preparing for Success*, (The Hague, the Netherlands: Clingendael, 2010): p. 8.



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