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Security beyond deterrence: Connecting EU defence and peace

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Summary

The EU is increasingly confronted with a hardening geopolitical landscape determined by naked power plays. Russia's war in Ukraine, the expansion of hybrid threats and uncertainty over US security guarantees in Europe have pushed strategic autonomy, military readiness and deterrence to the centre of European policy discussions. The NATO summit in Ankara on 7-8 July 2026 will make this debate especially visible, as European leaders are expected to demonstrate greater defence readiness while also clarifying how NATO complementarity can sit alongside the EU's wider responsibilities for diplomacy, conflict prevention, democratic resilience and sustainable peace. That shift is understandable, but it also risks crowding out conflict prevention, peacebuilding and democratic governance - the very agendas that make security sustainable over time and that have been hallmarks of the EU's external engagements around peace and security.

This brief argues that the EU should not treat defence, peace and democracy as competing or sequential priorities. Deterrence may be an important part of conflict prevention, but it cannot replace diplomacy, mediation, inclusive governance, human security and social cohesion. The challenge is therefore not whether the EU should invest in defence, but how it can do so without narrowing its foreign policy to military preparedness.

Two EU-internal policy moments are especially important: the expected EU security strategy, which is expected to be published after the NATO summit in Ankara, and negotiations on the next multiannual financial framework (MFF), including the proposed Global Europe Instrument (GEI), which will cover the 2028–2034 period. Both should be used to define security more broadly, protect dedicated space for conflict prevention and peacebuilding, and make conflict sensitivity and due diligence core requirements for defence-related external action.

1. Why this brief matters

The EU remains a peace actor by treaty and by political identity. Yet its security debate is changing quickly. Since 2022, and the start of Russia's war in Ukraine, European leaders have dramatically shifted their focus on (European) territorial defence, military readiness and strategic autonomy. At the same time, the second Trump Administration has increased the pressure on European leaders to spend more under NATO to unprecedented levels, crystallised in the The Hague Summit Declaration, where NATO allies agreed they will allocate at least 3.5% of GDP annually. Defence investments have risen sharply (rising by 42% in 2024 alone), and the next EU security strategy is expected to set a new direction for the EU's approach to defence and security, at home and abroad.

This shift reflects real threats and changing security trends. The war in Ukraine, hybrid threats, cyber risks, pressure on critical infrastructure and uncertainty over US foreign and security policy all require a stronger European response. But the current debate also creates a risk: peacebuilding, conflict prevention and democratic governance may be treated as secondary, optional or dependent on available resources after defence priorities are met.

That would be a mistake. Fragility, polarisation, weak governance and violent extremism cannot be addressed through military means alone. Nor can deterrence be credible over time if societies are divided, institutions lack legitimacy, or partners experience European engagement as inconsistent and overly security-driven. A stronger EU security posture should therefore be matched by a stronger peace and resilience agenda. This would also be in line with what is at the heart of the EU's DNA, as well as captured in the EU Treaty: the promotion of peace and the values upon which the EU was founded.

This briefing note is a shorter version of a discussion paper published in April 2026. In partnership with Search for Common Ground, ECDPM conducted research and consultations with EU institutions, EU member states' representatives and experts between October 2025 and January 2026. Preliminary findings served as a conversation starter for a closed-door workshop and discussion that ECDPM organised on 20 March 2026. The consultations and main points raised during the workshop point to three main shifts and key policy choices and opportunities for the EU, which are all presented in the following sections.

2. Three shifts reshaping EU external action

2.1 Defence and deterrence are moving to the centre

The first shift is political and budgetary. Defence and deterrence now dominate many EU and member state discussions, and have become some of the most salient political issues across Europe. Vice versa, EU contributions to conflict prevention, mediation and peacebuilding receive less attention. This does not mean that peace has disappeared from EU language (or that the EU has entirely abandoned conflict mediation processes). It means that peace, for and in Europe, is increasingly being framed through the lens of military readiness, deterrence and strength.

This matters for external action. Peacebuilding requires long-term engagement, patient political attention, dedicated funding and the ability to mobilise expertise. It often costs less than defence, but it cannot survive on rhetorical support alone. If budgetary flexibility in the EU's next multiannual financial framework (MFF) is used mainly to respond to short-term geopolitical priorities or to urgent crises, long-term support to fragile and conflict-affected settings may become less predictable, less structural and less needs-based.

2.2 The geographic focus is narrowing

The second shift is geographic. The Eastern flank now largely dominates the EU security agenda, with some exceptions. That is politically understandable, given Russia's war against Ukraine and the direct risks the war poses to Europe's borders and beyond. But it has consequences for the EU's engagement elsewhere, especially in parts of Africa where European policy already suffers from interrupted partnerships and reduced strategic continuity.

The answer is not to dilute attention to Ukraine, but to avoid an unbalanced trade-off that risks treating fragile contexts elsewhere as marginal to European security. The Sahel illustrates this trade-off that will need to be considered in the EU's geographic security shift. Europe's credibility in supporting Ukraine's war effort is often linked to being able to foot the bill for recovery, reconstruction and military support, seen as a way to boost its strategic autonomy and build collective support for Ukraine's territorial defence capacity. Yet EU officials and member state representatives also recognise that reduced engagement in other conflict-affected and fragile regions, including the Sahel, can weaken Europe's influence, as it limits its cooperation with key partners and makes it harder to prevent threats such as violent extremism or instability.

2.3 The narrative of peace is changing

The third shift is conceptual. Deterrence is increasingly presented as a pathway to peace, and sometimes as conflict prevention itself. This framing can be useful if it opens a broader discussion on resilience, social cohesion and the ability of societies to withstand destabilisation. It is risky if it narrows peace to defence readiness and military capabilities, and that deterrence is presented as a direct pathway to peace. A broader understanding of deterrence should, however, include the strength of democratic institutions, social trust and cohesion, education, resilient (soft and hard) infrastructures, inclusive governance systems and the ability of societies to resist polarisation and disinformation. During a workshop organised to present and validate preliminary findings of our research, participants from across peace, security, development and military sectors agreed that military means have proven time and time again to be insufficient to achieve enduring peace. In that sense, democratic resilience and human security are not add-ons to a security agenda, but are rather part of the foundation on which sustainable peace and security rest.

Box 1: What a broader deterrence agenda ideally would include

- credible defence capabilities and NATO complementarity;
- diplomacy and channels for de-escalation to reduce miscalculation;
- conflict prevention, mediation and peacebuilding in fragile settings;
- inclusive governance, democratic legitimacy and social cohesion;
- resilient infrastructure, cyber networks, ports and logistics;
- education, public trust and whole-of-society preparedness.

Source: Desmidt and Gianesello (2026).

3. Why existing frameworks to bridge security, peace and defence are not effective

The EU already has frameworks that should help bridge security and peace agendas. The 'integrated approach to external conflicts and crisis' and the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus are all approaches that have been actively supported by the EU. Several member states have also invested resources in designing 3D approaches linking diplomacy, defence and development. These frameworks and approaches all point in the right direction.

They recognise that security is multidimensional and that different parts of the foreign policy toolbox should work together.

This shows that the problem is not a lack of concepts, but rather their weak operationalisation and uptake. In practice, integrated approaches often remain under-resourced, fragmented and dependent on individual projects or personalities. When crises hit, ad hoc coordination often replaces institutionalised ways of working. Lessons from Afghanistan, Niger, the Sahel and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, both positive and negative, have not been effectively taken on board into wider EU-level practice.

As flagged during our research and consultations, this is often a problem of trust and a lack of mutual understanding. Defence, development, diplomacy and peacebuilding communities do not always understand each other's mandates, incentives or constraints. Military actors may see peacebuilders as unwilling to engage, while peacebuilders may fear that cooperation with defence actors compromises their independence or legitimacy. Both concerns need to be taken seriously, but avoiding dialogue leaves policy shaped by siloes and reinforces a false choice between security and peace, and between development and democratic resilience.

A more useful approach is closer, direct interaction. This interaction should be understood as, essentially, a closer working and trust relationship between peace and security, military and civil society actors. This requires dedicated efforts, attention and resources. In fragile settings, military, diplomatic, development and peace actors often operate at the same time. They need regular exchange, shared analysis (to the extent possible), and shared agreement and clarity on complementary roles rather than a simplified model in which security comes first and peacebuilding, development and civil society support follow later.

4. Strategic choices for the EU

The EU's defence turn is not in itself incompatible with its role as a peace actor, but it does present itself as a critical juncture in EU external action. The question is how this shift is framed, funded and operationalised. The EU will have to make strategic choices to ensure that stronger defence and deterrence are matched by sustained investment in diplomacy, conflict prevention, peacebuilding, democratic resilience and human security.

In this context, the EU, understood as the EU institutions and EU Member States together, has a few important choices to make:

4.1 Use the EU security strategy to define security broadly

The new EU security strategy, expected after of the July 2026 NATO Summit in Ankara, is a key opportunity to avoid a narrow, militarised concept of security. It should affirm the EU as a peace actor, embrace a multidimensional understanding of security, while recognising the role of defence and NATO complementarity. It should also state clearly that defence, deterrence, resilience, human security, conflict prevention and peacebuilding are mutually reinforcing agendas.

The new EU security strategy should also smartly balance the comparative advantages and competencies of the EU vis-à-vis its member states and vis-à-vis NATO. There are concerns over the scope of the strategy, while there is clear acknowledgement that a refreshed strategy is needed. But it needs to harness the necessary buy-in and balance in order to offer the EU and its member states a shared and clear political frame for aligning national strategies with EU-level priorities.

4.2 Protect conflict prevention and peacebuilding in the next MFF

The next MFF, and in particular the planned Global Europe Instrument (GEI), will shape what the EU can actually do. If the GEI loses dedicated space and budget for conflict prevention and peacebuilding, these agendas risk being squeezed by more short-term, crisis-driven geopolitical priorities. Flexibility is useful, but without safeguards, it can weaken long-term engagement in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

It should also make conflict analysis a cross-cutting requirement across external action instruments, including those linked to security and defence. This would allow the EU to leverage the investments made in conflict analysis, screening and strategic foresight capabilities. This would also help ensure that the defence pivot does not undermine the conditions for sustainable peace.

4.3 Systematic application of conflict sensitivity and due diligence assessments

As defence budgets and instruments grow, the EU has leverage to raise standards globally. In 2024, the EU Foreign Ministers approved the EU Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Due Diligence Policy (EU HRDDP) on Security Sector Support to third parties. Conflict sensitivity assessments and human rights and international humanitarian law due diligence should be systematically applied to defence-related spending and external action, including European Peace Facility support and Common Security and Defence Policy engagement.

This means treating due diligence as a core design requirement for engagements in EU external action, not as a human rights add-on. It requires resources for analysis, adaptation, monitoring, learning and follow-up. It also calls for practical guidance and training for defence planners, purchasers and disbursers, developed with peacebuilding organisations that already carry out such assessments.

4.4 Move from consultation to structured dialogue between peace and defence communities

The EU should set up regular working relationships between defence, diplomacy, development, governance and peacebuilding actors and communities. Dialogue should not happen only when a crisis emerges or when a consultation is required, for example, around the development of the European security strategy. It should be part of how security partnerships, Common Security and Defence Policy engagement and the European Peace Facility support are designed and reviewed.

Structured dialogue should also include local voices and country-level expertise. Local partners often understand conflict dynamics, legitimacy risks, social tensions and local interests better than external actors. Their insights can help defence and security engagement avoid harm and connect to wider peace objectives.

4.5 Rebalance geographic engagement without ignoring Ukraine

Ukraine and the Eastern flank will remain central to EU security. But the EU should avoid a binary choice between territorial defence and engagement in fragile contexts elsewhere. Instability in the Sahel, the Gulf of Guinea and other regions (such as the Indo-Pacific) still affects European interests, partner relations and global stability.

Security and defence partnerships with African partners may create openings (such as the one signed with Ghana in March 2026), but only if they are not reduced to equipment delivery or narrow security cooperation. They should include mediation, peacebuilding, crisis prevention, governance and accountability from the start, with clear mechanisms to assess performance and impact.

4.6 Clarify roles across EU institutions and member states

The EU's turn towards defence is complicated by split competences between the EU, member states and NATO. Member states remain the main drivers of defence policy, while EU institutions, in exchange with knowledgeable EU Member States' agencies, bring instruments, coordination capacity, development experience and

diplomatic reach. Without a clearer division of labour, policy will continue to be shaped by blurred mandates and institutional competition.

The EU's added value should lie in connecting these agendas: supporting defence readiness where appropriate, while ensuring that external action remains grounded in diplomacy, conflict prevention, human security and responsible partnerships.

5. Recommendations according to key actor

For the European Commission and EEAS

- Use the new EU security strategy to define security as a combination of defence, diplomacy, resilience, human security, democratic governance and conflict prevention.
- Systematically apply conflict sensitivity assessments and human rights and international humanitarian law due diligence for defence-related external action.
- Create practical guidance for defence planners and EU delegations on how to connect security cooperation with peacebuilding and governance objectives.

For EU member states

- Protect funding for conflict prevention and peacebuilding in national and EU budget negotiations, rather than treating aid and defence as a zero-sum choice.
- Use NATO resilience spending discussions to identify areas where peace, security and resilience investments can reinforce each other.
- Strengthen parliamentary oversight and transparency on arms exports and defence-related external action.

For peacebuilding and civil society actors

- Explore options and modes (including guidance and orientation) to engage earlier and in more structured ways with defence and security planners to shape risk analysis, conflict sensitivity and accountability standards.
- Bring evidence on local conflict dynamics, social cohesion and governance risks into security discussions.

- Avoid treating defence engagement as a single category. Distinguish between areas where cooperation can reduce harm and areas where principled distance is needed.

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