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THE EU PEACE PROJECT IN A GEOPOLITICAL ERA

In 2012, the European Union (EU) was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize “for over six decades [having] contributed to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe.” A decade later, amid a bloody war at the EU’s borders and a pivot towards geopolitics and defence, CMI gathered over 120 high-level experts in Brussels on 19 January 2024 to discuss the role of peace in the increasingly referenced new European security architecture. This CMI Insight reflects on some of these discussions and considers what lies ahead for the prized peace project.

The international context has transformed since 2012, marked by paradoxical shifts: a growing multipolarity and eroding multilateralism, intensifying connectivity, and faltering global norms. This poses a fundamental challenge to the EU as one of the main promoters of multilateralism and the rules-based international order.

Having more actors and less rules allows for more aggressive pursuits of national interests. In his speech to the UN General Assembly on 7 February 2024, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned of an impending “age of chaos”, meaning “a dangerous and unpredictable free-for-all with total impunity.” Most worryingly, this involves a global upsurge of large-scale military conflicts characterised by three new developments.

First, a rise of middle powers or geopolitical shift states with relatively strong regional influence and neutral positions in global conflicts, thus wielding the potential to influence big power dynamics. Military force is increasingly a part of their arsenal. Second, inter-state conflicts allowing for the weaponisation of practically all aspects of interdependence: from energy to migration and finance to information. Third, geopolitical rifts eroding the capacity of international and regional organisations to act and agree on desired end states of conflicts.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to see where foreign policy ends and domestic politics begin. The unparalleled political mobilisation around Ukraine and Gaza mean that these wars have real potential to incite internal violence and mayhem in other parts of the

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Reflection is needed on the EU as a peace project in a changing context where the EU’s response to war comprises enlargement, defence cooperation, and transactional partnerships.
- There is not one European security architecture, but an ecosystem of overlapping mandates and memberships, with the EU playing a central role in softening boundaries and ensuring coherence.
- The EU must carefully balance security posturing and peace while remembering that its key peacemaking strengths lie in multilateralism and soft power.

world. As common frameworks for interaction erode, unpredictability rises, trust diminishes, and populism preys on fears for the unknown. The requirements for maintaining stability extend beyond individual conflicts.

To address these global challenges, a conscious and collective restructuring of world order will take place. Until then, competition will be about staying relevant on the global scene and thus securing a place at the table.

The EU’s response to making peace under these conditions has three facets, predicted as top priorities for the EU’s next College: EU enlargement, defence cooperation, and strategic and transactional international partnerships. These processes are reshaping the notion of peace as understood (and projected) by the EU.

During his visit to Kiev on 7 February 2024, the EU High Representative

noted how “the European Union was built around the economy, to defuse conflict with negotiations and compromise.” He then noted how the Russian invasion of Ukraine “has changed our mindset. Now, we need to change the complete institutional setting of the European Union to adapt it to this new geostrategic reality. It is no longer about making peace among us; it is to face the challenges in our borders.”

The historic decision to reopen the enlargement process brings back one of the most successful tools in the EU’s policy arsenal, yet it also raises the stakes and underscores the need to get it right. By retaining its influence in the Eastern Neighbourhood, the EU consolidates its role as a global player among those who appreciate a strong and capable Union.

While conflicts have been historically linked to EU enlargement, the process has frequently paved a way for crisis

management. History has shown that any conflict resolution process should run parallel with enlargement, which can provide new impetus to the work. Enlargement could be a major peace project if handled well.

It matters less that the motivation for enlargement has shifted from peace and expanding common markets towards keeping unfriendly neighbors away. More significant are the risks involved with prioritising political expediency over peacemaking and neglecting the EU's Southern Neighbourhood. Preserving influence (and decreasing that of others) in this crucial region will increase stability at home and consolidate the EU's role as a relevant global peace actor.

The EU has evolved from a civilian power to an actor with a security strategy and a strategic compass to bolster its military capabilities. However, peace and defence have always been closely connected in the EU. In the past, the Union maintained a paradigm of interdependence fostering security and peace. Currently, the focus on countering weaponisation lies in resilience in areas such as energy and industrial policy, trade, the green transition, and technology. In the same vein, the EU's support for Ukraine is considered in defensive terms. While the EU was previously perceived solely a soft power, the pendulum now swings the other way.

The focus on resilience and development of defence capabilities is not anathema to the EU as a peace project. Ukraine is showing the value of both hard and soft tools. In a global perspective, the EU's and its member states' military capabilities outside Europe are shrinking. The limitations are even more acute for EU member states individually, underscoring the need for more joint EU action. At the same time, the EU's influence is more rooted in its soft than its hard power. The EU must systematically assess the balance between the two within a long-term vision and strategy. While finding a middle ground is difficult, history suggests the EU is well positioned to strike that balance.

Security posturing and peace must go hand in hand, in a more comprehensive ecosystem of actors, organisations and coalitions with overlapping mandates and memberships across the region, from Nato to the European Political Community, to the OSCE and the UN. The EU plays a central role in softening institutional boundaries. It cannot afford for the ecosystem to be disjointed, nor should it attempt to create a single European security architecture.

The EU has been a steadfast supporter of multilateralism and international and regional organisations. Defending these global commons requires building partnerships across the North-South divide and preventing confrontation between major powers. The EU must resist false dichotomies between pragmatism and values. Tackling accusations of double standards is paramount.

The EU's response to the war in Ukraine is undermining its credibility as a global peace actor. The rejection of the rules-based international order is spilling over to a rejection of the EU, and vice versa. The EU must hence focus on navigating rather than shaping reality. This requires a more nuanced approach, with less projection of exceptionalism and more in-depth understanding of the world and the EU's role as it is, and as seen in the eyes of the beholders. The EU must continue forging a more realistic, pragmatic, and

geopolitical approach, while not losing sight of its founding principles.

All three facets of the EU's response could gain from more deft action and a novel mindset that seeks to balance the Union's fundamental values with its core interests rather than adjusting to the EU Member States' long list of demands. This could be helped by important reforms carried out by the next EU leadership. Acknowledging the EU's core interests can also help to recognise those of its international partners and help with alliance building. Enhancing the Union's role in global peacemaking requires a keener ear for the interests of its partners and perhaps a less vociferous promotion of its own interests and values.

1) <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2012/summary/> (accessed 3 April 2024).

2) Secretary-General's remarks to the General Assembly on Priorities for 2024, New York, 7 February 2023, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2024-02-07/secretary-generals-remarks-the-general-assembly-priorities-for-2024> (accessed on 19 February 2024).

3) Ukraine: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell to deputies in Verkhovna Rada, Kiev, 7 February 2024; https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/ukraine-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-deputies-verkhovna-rada_en (accessed on 19 February 2024).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Peace should be the centerpiece of the agenda of the EU's new College, not an afterthought.
- The EU should insist on combining its soft and hard power across the political and operational peace agenda – in discourse and action, in a more nuanced approach that seeks to navigate rather than steer.
- The EU enlargement process should run parallel with peacemaking in the accession countries. It is paramount that the Southern neighbourhood is not left aside.