Is the European Peace Facility really about peace?

by Megan Ferrando, 17 December 2021

The European Peace Facility (EPF) is a new pot of money intended to make the EU a stronger military actor in crises. But the ability to spend more will not in itself make the Union better able to resolve conflicts.

The EU has always been more comfortable as a 'soft power', relying mainly on its economic strength and position as the world's largest aid donor for political influence, counting on the US for protection. But with the growing assertiveness of some of the Union's neighbours, conflicts to its south and east flaring up, and the US losing interest in ensuring Europe's security, member-states have decided that the EU should "learn the language of power" – be willing and able to employ military force to defend its security interests. As part of this quest towards becoming a more military power, the Union wants to step up its efforts to sort out conflicts abroad. The EU's new fund, the EPF, is meant to make this happen. But the Union needs to address legitimate concerns within EU institutions, member-states and civil society that sending more military funding and weapons to already fragile countries could do more harm than good.

Launched last summer, the EU uses the EPF to cover the costs of its own military missions, and to fund the training and equipment of partners' peacekeeping forces (like the African Union) and military alliances (like the regional security alliance known as G5 Sahel). As the EPF allows the EU for the first time to also supply weapons, the Union is hoping that it will forge stronger military partnerships, which will boost its reputation as a security actor. As the EPF is not part of the EU's regular budget, it is not the European Commission but member-states that decide, unanimously, where and how to spend the money. The Union's diplomatic arm, the European External Action Service (EEAS), is responsible for planning and carrying out EPF assistance measures. Supporters within member-states and the EEAS hope that the fund can both fulfil a political role and make a significant contribution to stabilising conflicts. These are high expectations for a fund with a budget of €5 billion for the period of 2021-27 – which only represents an average of 0.47 per cent of the EU's annual budget.

Still, supporters of the EPF consider the fund to be an asset. First, they argue that more military investment could fill a gap in the array of EU crisis management tools. The armed forces of partner countries working with EU military training missions have often been under-equipped, lacking logistical equipment, vehicles, weapons and funding for wages. EU trainers have had to rely on military equipment

donated bilaterally by member-states or international actors, or even on replica weapons. With more direct military support, EU training missions should become more effective.

Second, a stronger EU role through the EPF could avoid duplication of different member-states' train and equip programmes, and promote a European brand. For France, which is gradually decreasing its presence in the Sahel, handing over some responsibilities to the EU is particularly valuable as it means reducing the immense costs it has incurred since it began its current operations in Mali in 2013. African partners will also see the EU as a more neutral actor than the former colonial power, increasing the legitimacy of the missions on the ground.

A third argument for the EPF is that building military partnerships could send a strong signal to the EU's regional competitors. In Africa, Turkey and Russia have supplied weapons to the armed forces of countries including Mali, Somalia and the Central African Republic (CAR) when EU training missions could not. As a result, Ankara and Moscow have gained political influence at the expense of the EU. In the CAR and Mali, Russia has further strengthened its position by building on, and fueling, local anti-French sentiments, and then filling the military and political gaps left as France reduces its presence. By becoming a more credible security partner, the EU is hoping to retain influence in regions where its competitors are gaining a dominant position.

Fourth, the EU could use its enhanced security support to push its partners, for example in Africa, to implement institutional reforms, step up anti-corruption efforts and increase accountability. The EU can also use its more 'complete' (and therefore more attractive) military training package to promote compliance by partner armed forces with human rights and international humanitarian law standards. Short-term military investments, the rationale goes, will pave the way for longer-term political reforms.

But it will be difficult for the EPF to deliver on its many promises. The EPF suffers from similar flaws to the EU's wider common security and defence policy (CSDP) activities. If EU military missions have so far yielded limited results compared with the significant financial, political and human investments made, this is not merely because these missions lacked equipment. Stabilising countries and solving conflicts is very complex. On paper, the EU has understood this for a long time. Its CSDP (now including the EPF) is part of the 'integrated approach' – the EU's strategy to address conflicts and crises with a combination of policies, including diplomacy, security, peacebuilding and development. Each conflict situation requires an in-depth analysis to understand which policy should be used (or not), when and how.

In practice, however, there is an unhelpful disconnect between the EU's short-term civilian and military activities under CSDP (led by member-states and the EEAS) and its longer-term work on governance, anti-corruption, and development (led by the European Commission). Under the integrated approach, CSDP missions should be working together with the development and political branches of the EU towards making a country's security actors more accountable and responsive to the needs of their population. But CSDP training – by military missions in particular – often focuses excessively on strengthening security actors' capacities, with little attention paid to reforming them. The prevalent idea is that a country should first be stabilised, and then developed. As High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell has said, "you will not attract investment and you will not build a country without security, and security requires strength, and strength requires arms".

Such comments risk weakening the EU's own integrated approach, which promotes a focus on 'human security' – the security needs of populations rather than of states and armies. The EU was already

underusing its existing military, diplomatic and other leverage to demand institutional reforms of partners. It is unlikely that the EPF, and the ambition to use it in a race against Russia or Turkey for military partnerships, will change this. Worse still, further strengthening armies and governments without imposing conditions on how they use their new capabilities may put at risk the very populations they are supposed to protect. In 2020, more civilians were killed in the Sahel by their own state security forces than by armed groups. This includes attacks by the security forces of countries that received EU training. As has been widely documented in Mali, civilians' grievances against the state have strengthened support for armed groups and been an important recruitment tool for them. A hard security intervention which does not take into account the security needs and preferences of local populations can significantly worsen the security situation, increase corruption and undermine the trust of populations in their own governments, as well as in the EU as a security provider.

Some member-states are aware of the risks of 'security first' approaches, and how the EPF could worsen them. They fear being associated with partners who commit human rights violations, or getting entangled in protracted and unwinnable conflicts like Afghanistan. But they also feel under pressure to use the EPF. If they are too hesitant with it, partner states may lack the capacity to control their territory. This in turn could lead to an increase in instability and more migration towards Europe, both of which the EU fears. Or partners might turn to the EU's competitors, as in the CAR, where at least one EU-trained battalion is now under the command of the Russian Wagner Group mercenaries. Internally, the EU also needs to show that the two-and-a-half years of negotiation and investments in the EPF have not been for nothing. In the first half year of the EPF, the Union has launched seven EPF assistance measures. The large number, but mostly with relatively small budgets, reflects this urge to show that the EPF is being used, while not taking significant risks.

If the EPF is to function effectively, the EU should first reflect on what it really wants to achieve with its crisis management and security operations. If it primarily seeks to strengthen political alliances in order to make itself a 'geopolitical' actor, the Union will need to accept that some of the entities it collaborates with might commit human rights violations or antagonise their own populations. This seems like a terrible option, both for affected communities and the EU's reputation. If, on the other hand, the EU's primary aim for its crisis management is to improve conditions in unstable conflict situations, it should strengthen the co-ordination between its military tools and other policies that form part of the integrated approach, such as the diplomatic, development and peacebuilding efforts of EU delegations and member-state embassies.

Improving that co-ordination is an enormous task, but it is the right moment to do so. The EU is currently developing its Strategic Compass, a process which brings together member-states to discuss how to shape the EU's security and defence in the years ahead. One part of the process focuses on EU crisis management operations and the EPF, but these discussions are mostly focused on improving missions' effectiveness and capacity, not their impact. Having a more effective mission is good, but it must also respond to the security needs of populations affected by conflicts in order to make lasting change. In the Sahel, for example, a large number of communities support the actions of armed groups. Rather than mainly looking at this situation through a counter-terrorism lens, the EU and member-states should instead consider what economic and security needs armed groups fulfil for local populations. Military action should not automatically be preferred to developmental and political measures.

The current conflict in Mozambique could be a good place to start: the EU is currently setting up a new military training mission (including EPF-financed military equipment) to train the Mozambican

army so that it can better counter the violent insurgency that has been devastating the Cabo Delgado province. Civilians in the region are being killed by armed groups Daesh and Al-Shabaab, but also by their own government security forces and by private military contractor Dyck Advisory Group, hired by the Mozambican government. As in the Sahel, years of socio-economic marginalisation of the local population has bred grievances against the Mozambican state, which has helped armed groups with recruiting new fighters. The EU has the opportunity to showcase the value of the EPF as part of a broader EU approach: one that engages through its military mission to counter the insurgency, but which also makes use of the EU's political and development leverage to hold the Mozambican government to account for its responsibilities in the conflict.

The EU may wish to become more 'geopolitical' and security-oriented in its external action, but it should not forget that its soft power instruments give it immense capacity for influence and peace-making. As the EU tries to achieve the difficult balance between advancing its (geo)political interests and contributing to peace and security, it should first focus on the latter: its reputation as a global security actor will not depend on owning an instrument like the EPF, but on putting it to use in a way that contributes to solving conflicts and crises.

Megan Ferrando is the Clara Marina O'Donnell fellow (2021-22) at the Centre for European Reform.