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A Growing Gap

EU Peace and Security Funding Beyond Ukraine

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If you only read one page...

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A gap has emerged in the EU's funding framework for peace and security efforts beyond Ukraine. While wars and tensions are worsening in many regions of relevance to the EU's core interests, the flexible funds for reacting to crises that are provided through the current seven-year budget are already almost depleted.

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This gap cannot be filled through other sources within the EU's funding architecture. Much of EU funding remains long-term and slow to be mobilized; at the same time, the Commission's flagship Global Gateway initiatives require security and predictability, which tend to be absent in countries in crisis. As a result, the funding gap for peace and security continues to grow, to the detriment of EU interests as well as human security.

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To plug the gap, EU leaders should recognize and clearly articulate the need for the Union to prioritize strategic investments in peace and security - not just in the EU's neighborhood but also beyond.

Introduction

War has arrived on the European Union's doorstep again: through Russia's invasion of Ukraine, of course, but also via a growing number of other violent crises, some persisting, some new – from the Sahel through the Horn of Africa, Yemen, Gaza, and Syria. In February of 2024, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen acknowledged that something was changing:

> *"In the last years, many European illusions have been shattered. The illusion that peace is permanent ... The illusion that Europe on its own was doing enough on security – be it economic or military, conventional or cyber. As we look around us, it is clear there is no room for any more illusions."*[1]

In response, the EU has leveraged all its peace and security tools and revamped some of them, drawing upon a special funding window for unforeseen circumstances as well as off-budget funds (meaning those outside of the Union's multi-annual budget) provided by member states for unprecedented lethal military assistance. Four years into the present seven-year budget (2021-27), however, the cushion for unexpected crises is all but used up and the Commission's own review has made clear that a gap has emerged in the current financial framework – one that is already hampering effective responses to peace and security challenges.[2]

Where exactly is this gap? The Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO), which runs emergency aid, and the limited rapid response funding under Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI – GE) are doing their jobs, but after 18 to 30 months the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI) almost always ends its financial support for crisis response measures. Real-world crises, however, do not suddenly stop just because the EU's bureaucracy pulls the brakes. The EU's longer-term funding, on the other hand, is rarely able to simply "take over" when emergency and crisis response funding ends. Namely, the geographic and thematic pillars of NDICI – GE are based on the logic of good development, meaning its funding is long-term and reliable but allows for even less flexibility in reacting to emerging crises. Moreover, as many partnerships funds are effectively being reallocated to support the geopolitical investment logic of the EU's Global Gateway initiative, there will soon be far too little money left for EU officials to manage persistent crises elsewhere and support their resolution. Because of this gap in funding, the EU risks missing "critical moments ... where there is a need and opportunity to support the foundations necessary for peacebuilding, resumption of development activities and preventing the cyclical reemergence of violence."[3]

In this paper, we explain how this gap came about and offer initial thoughts on what to do about it. First, we provide a brief description of the relevant elements of the EU's external funding instruments for security, stability and peace, highlighting how – by design – these instruments lack flexibility. Second, we explain how the financing tools created to build flexibility into the system have worked – primarily based on available unallocated money and summit-level political will – and why they cannot be easily replenished. Third, we analyze how two useful initiatives – "geographisation" (which means that most funds are disbursed at the national and regional level) and the Global Gateway (the EU's strategy to invest in infrastructure projects worldwide) – have left fragile, conflict-affected countries at risk of funding deficits. Finally, we conclude with initial thoughts on possible avenues for the remainder of the present multi-annual financial framework (until 2027) and the next one (2028-34). This research is based on: a document review; 27 interviews with EU officials, member state representatives, civil society representatives, and experts; and a closed-door roundtable held on June 18, which brought together 22 participants from the EU Commission DGs INTPA, ECHO and FPI, and EEAS as well as civil society and EU member states.

Figure 1: Rapid Response Funds Are Declining But the Need Is Increasing

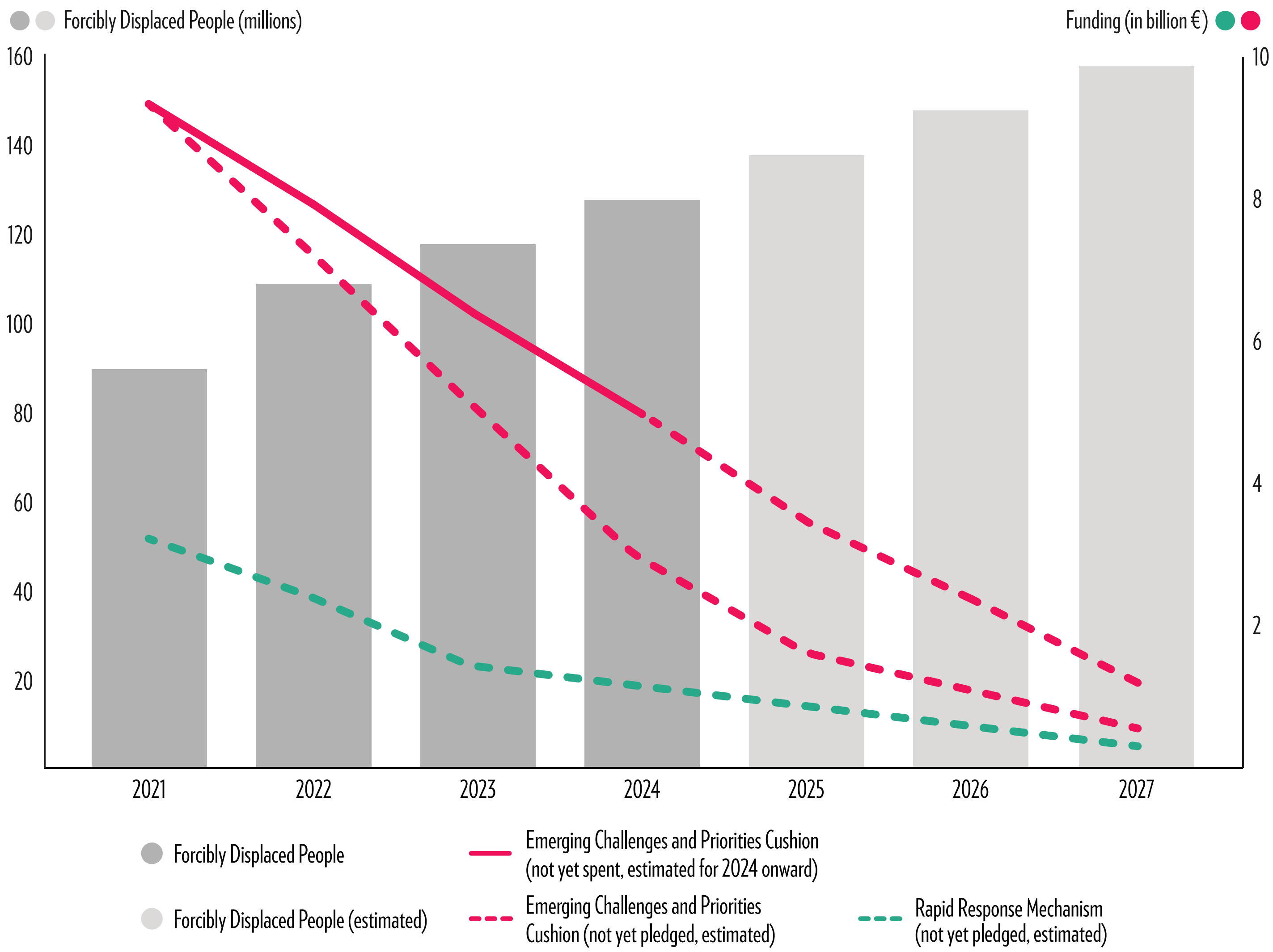

Figure 1 shows: (1) the amount pledged for the emerging challenges and priorities cushion by year; (2) the amount already spent by the rapid response mechanisms (until 2022) and the likely spend of the remaining funds until 2027; and (3) the number of forcibly displaced people globally until 2023 and then an estimated figure (based on a similar percentage increase) until 2027. As the number of crises and conflicts in the world grows (seen, for instance, in the continued rise of the number of forcibly displaced people around the world), the remaining peace and security funding that the EU has available to react quickly is going down.

The EU's External Funding Instruments: A Primer

Key Terms

The Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)	sets priorities for the entirety of the EU's budget for 2021-2027
Multiannual Indicative Programmes (MIPs)	set priorities for the regional, country and thematic strands for 2021-2027
Annual Action Plans (AAPs)	decide funding allocations in country, regional and thematic MIPs for the current year

The EU budget is negotiated for seven years at a time and outlined in the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). The current MFF runs for the years 2021-27. It includes seven so-called headings and external action is covered by "Heading 6: Neighbourhood and the World," which accounts for €110 billion of the approximately €1200 billion in total budget. It includes humanitarian aid, funds for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III), and – the lion's share at 79.5 billion (72%) - the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI-GE).

The NDICI-GE was an attempt by the Union to resource its external action more holistically and adaptively by pooling several funds together. Within this allotted funding, the EU budget is programmed in more detail via country, regional and thematic Multiannual Indicative Programmes (MIPs), which outline the priority areas, modalities and instruments (defined in a dialogue with partner countries, civil society and others) at the onset of the funding cycle.[4]

Each year, for every country and thematic pillar, the EU Commission breaks down the MIPs' priorities into an Annual Action Plan (AAP), which further specifies what it will fund that year.[5] This process of specification, which only decides on final funding allocations for the current year, allows for programming to be somewhat more reactive to emerging crises and political opportunities – but only if these fall within the country or thematic priorities.[6] Because these priorities are relatively broad, they leave room "for adapting to unforeseen events."[7]

This is all known as "programmable funding" (i.e., funding which goes through this process), and it is delivered through:

- **Geographic programs (€60.38 billion or 75% spent over seven years):** This forms the bulk of the NDICI-GE funding; it is divided into a "neighborhood" and a "non-neighborhood" envelope, with an approximate ratio between the two of one third for neighborhood and two thirds for non-neighborhood programs. The primary responsibility for this fund lies with DG INTPA and DG NEAR.[8]

- **Thematic programs (€6.36 billion or 8%):** Thematic programs support global and trans-regional initiatives, protect global public goods, or address global challenges. The key areas are: Human Rights and Democracy; Civil Society Organisations; Peace, Stability and Conflict Prevention; and Global Challenges. The primary responsibility for the Peace, Stability and Conflict Prevention program lies with FPI.

Figure 2: EU External Funding for 2021-2027

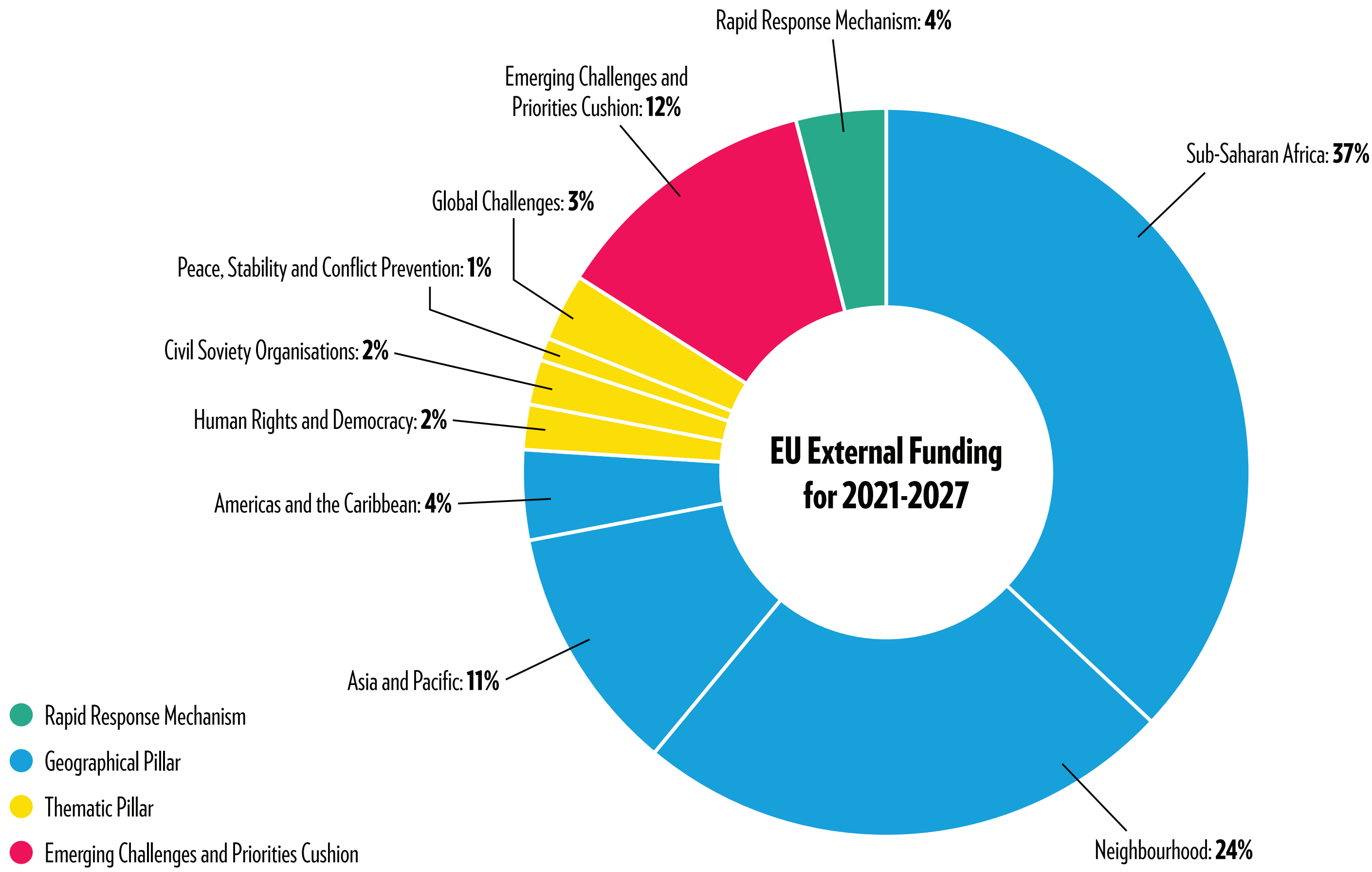

Figure 2 shows a breakdown of how the €80 billion in the EU's Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI-GE) are distributed. While €60 billion (or 75%) of NDICI-GE money goes into geographic programs, €3 billion (or 4%) goes to the rapid response mechanism, €10 billion (or 12%) goes to the cushion for emerging challenges and priorities, and €1 billion (or 1%) goes to the Peace, Stability and Conflict Prevention thematic area.

While this funding is not flexible, rare changes can be made within the seven-year period. For instance, as a result of the current MFF's mid-term revision, €7.6 billion were added to MFF Heading 6 for 2024 – mostly to support Syrian refugees in third countries, the Southern neighborhood and the Western Balkans.[9] Nevertheless, as one roundtable participant noted, programmable funding is like a "steam tanker": once set in motion, it does not want to change course. It is no wonder, then, that the EU struggles to quickly deploy funding to address unexpected challenges and exploit political opportunities as they arise. As another interviewee remarked, “the civil war will be over by the time you have asked Brussels for funding.”

To mitigate against the slow EU bureaucracy, decision-makers created two additional flexible components for the NDICI-GE funding mechanisms :

- A **rapid response mechanism** “to allow for a swift reaction to crises” (€3.2 billion or 4%, non-programmable)[10]: This money is mostly spent by FPI. It works in a very different way than the other two NDICI pillars and can deploy funding much more quickly. It is intended allow the EU to (1) contribute to stability and conflict prevention in situations of urgency, emerging crisis, and post-crisis, (2) strengthen resilience and humanitarian-development action, as well as (3) fulfill general foreign policy needs and priorities. It is supposed to be complementary to the geographic and thematic programs.

- The **cushion for emerging challenges and priorities** (€9.53 billion or 12%): This mechanism caters to unforeseen needs and priorities across each of the three NDICI-GE pillars. The “cushion” is used to top up any of the existing programs or the rapid response mechanism in case of unforeseen circumstances – as stated in the regulation: “to: (a) ensure an appropriate EU response in the event of unforeseen circumstances; (b) address new needs or emerging challenges, ... and (c) promote new EU-led or international initiatives or priorities.”[11]

The idea is for these mechanisms to better enable a quick response by the EU to stabilize violent conflicts or crises, or to take targeted action when a political opening offers a path toward peace.

Given that treaty provisions prohibit the EU budget from being used for military spending, member states have also used an off-budget instrument (i.e., one that is outside of the Union’s multi-annual budget) to undertake “hard security” cooperation. The most important of them is the European Peace Facility (EPF). Funding priorities for the EPF are decided every six months and must be unanimously accepted by member states, which means that while one dissenting vote is enough to halt the entire process, issues with strong political will get moved through rapidly. Hungary’s occasional veto aside, in the case of Ukraine, for example, funding was rapidly mobilized through this process.

These mechanisms have given the EU some funding flexibility when it comes to responding to crisis; however, as the next section explores, these efforts do have limitations. While flexibility can be found within the EU, it is not enough to deal with the scale of contemporary conflict and crisis.

Funding Flexibility in the EU

Flexibility can be created within the EU, primarily through available unallocated money or summit-level political will. The independent study evaluating the EU's external financing instruments (which served as the basis for the EU's mid-term review of these instruments, namely the NDICI-GE) noted that new mechanisms "have responded well to the rigidity criticised in the 2017 mid-term review of the previous [external funding instruments (EFIs)]," as demonstrated by "the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, and the Syrian refugee crisis in Türkiye and in the region."[12]

Unfortunately, current levels of flexibility are not sufficient to deal with the scale and variety of the crises and conflicts the EU must now grapple with. As the same independent study notes, "the succession of severe global or regional crises that characterised the end of the previous MFF and the first half of the current one has been weathered but depleted the EU's flexible funding sources."[13] As a result, "at the midpoint of the long-term budget, 80% of the cushion has already been earmarked, leaving just €1.9 billion until 2027."[14] Over half of this money has been spent on "the Neighbourhood and Enlargement regions, chiefly for Ukraine and Syrian refugee packages, while the remainder was dedicated mostly to global programmes, and EUR 400 million to Africa."[15] Similarly, three quarters of the rapid response pillar has been spent on those same regions, with sub-Saharan Africa coming "far second."[16] The independent review of external funding instruments stated that for either mechanism to work, "funding must be commensurate with the magnitude and frequency of the crises and emerging needs with which they are designed to deal," but this does not currently seem to be the case.[17]

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Even without depleted capacity, there is the added issue of timing, which the rapid response pillar does not fully resolve. While this pillar provides quick, flexible funding, the activities it funds are capped at a duration of 18 months. It is possible to extend the activities twice, for six months each time, after which it is strongly recommended for the support to continue via the country's regular programming. And indeed, some of our interlocutors did share examples where such a bridging between the rapid response pillar and NDICI-GE programming had worked well and led to more sustainable efforts. However, doing so was reported to be practically difficult and to have depended on personnel and the availability of scarce funding (especially in countries which receive less EU funding overall). As one participant noted in our workshop, "the gap is not just in the immediate response but between rapid action and long-term engagement ... FPI has been of huge added value ... but the issue is the follow-up and getting other parts of the EU to take on what's started by FPI and member states." The funding gap therefore often emerges mid-term, meaning that efforts started by the rapid response pillar typically last 18 to 30 months but then come to an abrupt halt.

Beyond these mechanisms, the dramatic increase in EPF funding following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is a powerful demonstration of how political will can drive flexibility in the EU . Following the events of February 2022, the total budget of the EPF tripled (to €17 billion) and, as of June 2024, €6.1 billion of these funds had been approved to provide military support – meaning lethal and non-lethal equipment and training – to the Ukrainian Armed Forces.[18] While a welcome instrument for speeding up the delivery of lethal equipment for Ukraine, the EPF's expansion has also raised concerns that it will lead to a militarization of EU foreign policy. The external evaluation study warned that "in the light of increasingly visible global securitisation trends ... a careful balance needs to be found in terms of promoting EU values and interests versus the activities of military actors on the ground."[19]

The success of the newly established €50 billion Ukraine Facility can also be attributed to the strong political buy-in that led to its creation. The facility mostly consists of financial aid in direct support (€38 billion, roughly €5 billion of which are grants and the rest loans); investment for reconstruction (€7 billion); and accession assistance. Such instruments can result in sizeable, interest-driven funding for peace and stability, but they also insert a degree of political uncertainty into planning: since these decisions are based on unanimity, member states can (and Hungary, for instance, does) block any next steps in terms of actually moving the funds[20].

The EPF and the Ukraine Facility show what willing and determined politicians can achieve, but they do nothing to create the kind of day-to-day flexibility EU officials so desperately seek to fill the peace and security funding gap . This is evident in the ways some officials are finding creative ways to create that flexibility: for instance, there is some additional flexibility that comes with a "declaration of crisis" in a given context as this triggers a loosening of reporting and programming procedures, making project planning and implementation easier for EU Delegations and their implementing partners. More and more EU Delegations in countries are thus asking for crisis declarations, even in cases where they are clearly not applicable.

EU officials' desire for more room to maneuver is also evident in their lamenting the loss of the EU Trust Fund model to external evaluators, with some stating specifically that they missed its flexibility.[21] This sentiment was reflected in our own interviews about the EU Trust Fund (EUTF) in Colombia, which aimed to support the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP). The EUTF's parameters were broad (like the peace agreement itself), meaning that activities were not rigidly set and could be quickly adapted based on progress and new information. Most decisions were also made in Colombia rather than Brussels, which avoided a slow and bureaucratic approval processes. Unfortunately, we also heard other Trust Funds – such as the EUTF for Africa – being criticized for being less flexible or allocating funds shortsightedly.

There are, then, strong limits to the flexibility of funding within the EU system, which greatly diminish its ability to react to "critical moments" in order to change the course of a conflict for the better . This is only likely to get worse if those countries most affected by conflict are also the least likely to receive funding, as the next section explores.

Figure 3: The EU's "Mid-Term" Funding Gap for Peace and Security

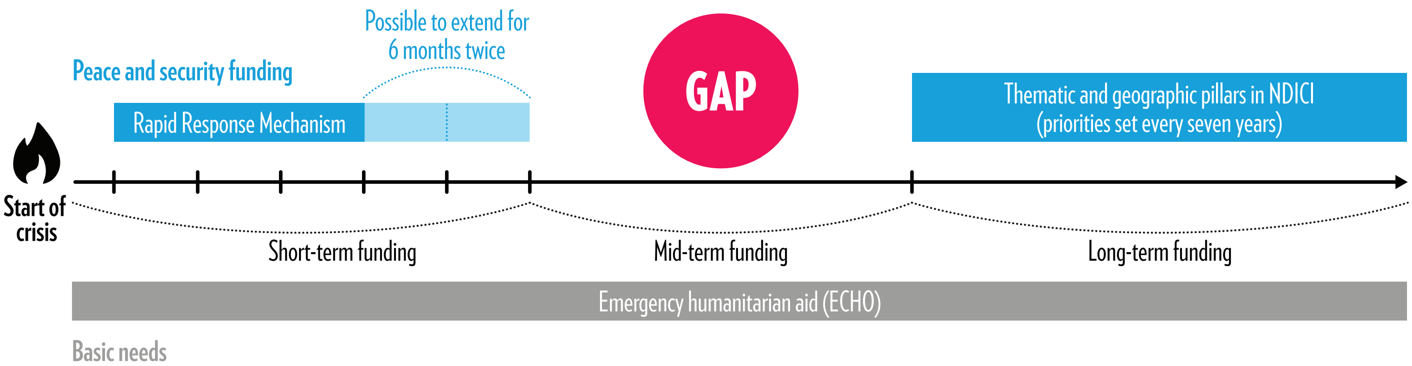

Figure 3 shows where the mid-term gap in the EU's peace and security funding mechanisms lies. Systems like the rapid response mechanism can more quickly respond to crises, but they almost always end after 30 months. The geographic and thematic pillars under NDICI-GE provide reliable long-term funding but are slow to be deployed to emerging crises.

Conflict-Affected Countries Fall Through the Cracks

The smaller envelopes for rapid reaction and unforeseen threats were never meant to be the only source of funding for peace and security, which is a top priority enshrined in Article 7 of the NDICI-GE regulation ("preserving peace, preventing conflicts and strengthening international security")[22] and covered by three of the five top priorities for external action laid down in the EU Global Strategy ("the security of our union", "state and societal resilience to our East and South", and "an integrated approach to conflicts and crises").[23] The idea was to tap into the bulk of the partnerships funds for those purposes: 76% of the NDICI-GE, or more than €60 billion over seven years, are allocated to the geographic pillar so "that EU Delegations and Member States in partner countries have a greater role in decision making over priorities and allocations in a given country."[24]

Although "peace" is referenced in 53 country MIPs, staff based in EU Delegations seem to rarely prioritize peace and security issues in practice.

In practice, this has not worked. Although "peace" is referenced in 53 country MIPs, staff based in EU Delegations seem to rarely prioritize peace and security issues in practice. For instance, the external study found that even when peace and security was an MIP priority, key programming staff expected that, despite their much smaller budgets, the thematic programs and the rapid response pillar would "deal with peace and security" for the countries in question, and that the geographic allocation could be used largely or entirely on other priorities.[25] Brussels and member states were either unwilling or unable to enforce the priority of security- and peace-related projects – in part because of a widespread understanding that the modalities of allocating INTPA funds to projects are well suited only to one particular kind of peacebuilding activity: long-term support to large civil society alliances or reliable government partners. For anything that requires frequent adaptation, smaller disbursements, or flexible arrangements with different partners to influence a volatile political situation in favor of the EU's interests in peace and security, the standard tender and disbursement tools are not working as well. The result is that most NDICI-GE funding supports other goals, and peace and security – particularly any attempt at strategically supporting a particular conflict resolution or crisis prevention strategy – have become under-resourced.

This gap may well grow further as an inadvertent victim of the EU Global Gateway's success. Launched in December 2021, Global Gateway "is a EUR 300 billion programme for financing and building clean infrastructure," according to Commission President Ursula von der Leyen: "Global Gateway has the size to make a difference. Just as importantly, Global Gateway lays out a new approach to big infrastructure projects. … Global Gateway is about giving choices to countries – better choices."[26] The focus on clean investment, big infrastructure and "giving choices to countries" means that Global Gateway aims to incentivize large green projects in places where the EU competes with China. The goal to raise those €300 billion from development banks and the private sector centers the investment logic – the requirement of some financial returns and limited risk. The focus on big projects, on the other hand, requires a reliable partner government for the EU to deal with. The resulting incentive for every part of the EU decision-making apparatus is to prioritize those reasonably solid investment opportunities over everything else.

Strategic investments in promoting peace and security in West Africa, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, across the Middle East, and in Asia deal with higher risks, volatile political situations, and very short-term political calculations in which the EU needs to carefully balance support for the government of the day with broader investments in sustainable institutions and better governance. Global Gateway is “only marginally suitable for highly fragile and conflict-affected countries. Investments need security and ‘good enough’ governance with calculable risks and predictability.”[27] It is thus not the right instrument for promoting security and peace, nor is it intended to be. The 225 flagship initiatives already launched or planned under Global Gateway are located mostly in emerging markets.

A different approach is needed for so-called fragile countries, where deep and intertangled political, security and humanitarian crises call for a focus on enhancing the resilience of local populations.

The 30 to 40 highly fragile or conflict-affected countries around the world are unlikely to meet the necessary standards of good-enough governance to provide these assurances. As a result, a subset of them will probably lose EU investments if funds shift to match the Global Gateway priorities. In other words, they will fall into the gap . Both the EU and specific member states seem to be aware of this problem, but a solution has yet to be proposed. In a recently leaked twenty-page INTPA briefing, the one line dealing with conflict-affected contexts simply stated that a “different approach is needed for so-called fragile countries, where deep and intertangled political, security and humanitarian crises call for a focus on enhancing the resilience of local populations.”[28] CONCORD (the European Confederation of NGOs working on sustainable development and international cooperation) went as far as to call this a “sell-out of international cooperation.”[29] Similarly, a recent piece from ecdpm warns that “ignoring fragile and conflict-affected countries will inevitably backfire on the EU, damaging its reputation and interests.”[30]

The fact that EU staff have increasingly seen their role as geopolitical rather than defined by terms of security, stability and peace has only added to the EU’s failing to close the peace and security gap. The rapid response mechanism and emerging threats cushion are useful funds, but they are severely depleted and generally limited to programs that last a maximum of 30 months. At the same time, those mechanisms created by strong political will, the likes of which were seen after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, do little to provide the day-to-day flexibility that many EU officials crave in other contexts, such as the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, or the Middle East. This matters and closing the peace and security gap should be at the top of the new Commission’s agenda.

What To Do About the Gap

The world today looks very different than it did when the EU's 2021-2027 budget was designed: Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, together with China's growing global influence through strategic investments, have caused EU policymakers to rethink how the Union can better engage in a world in which hard power, both military and economic, matters greatly. In response, the EU has been able to adapt and innovate much more rapidly and fundamentally than most observers expected in 2019 when Ursula von der Leyen promised "a geopolitical Commission." Since then, she and her team have proven the naysayers wrong on the geoeconomics front.[31] Now, defense is the new frontier: Lithuania's former prime minister Andrius Kubilius is entrusted with the newly created portfolio of Commissioner for Defence and Space. In addition, a new European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP)[32] is set to "mobilise €1.5 billion of the EU budget over the period 2025-2027"[33] – a small beginning for something that is likely to grow much bigger.[34]

While these funds will cover economic security and investment for the EU to grow militarily, with more punch and less duplication, the EU is at risk of forgetting about other wars. Violent conflicts in the Sahel and West Africa, in the Horn of Africa, in Gaza and Syria, in Myanmar, and elsewhere also threaten EU interests: they are a disaster for trade and economic development, they foment violent movements and force displacement, and further shrink the community of nations that respect human rights and democratic values.[35] A "geopolitical" European Union that has rediscovered the role of power and force in politics cannot afford to withdraw from these conflicts save for a trickle of slow-moving funds in support of whoever is deemed as acceptable civil society there.[36]

Now is the opportunity to plug the inadvertent gap that has opened. The EU is halfway through its current seven-year budget, and preparations are beginning for the next one, which will cover the period from 2028 to 2034. Now is the opportunity for a new Commission, together with individual member states, to build on some of the impressive advances it has made in improving its own funding architecture to exert itself on the international stage - not just in trade, economic security and (perhaps, soon) defense investment, but also in promoting its core interests and values and being a practically useful partner regarding the many violent conflicts along its shores.

There should be a clearly articulated recognition of the need to prioritize strategic investments in peace and security not just in the EU's neighborhood but beyond.

A clear-eyed EU approach to the wars and conflicts abroad will not treat every crisis the same or try to "fix" fragility – a far too common condition that is beyond the reach of technocratic policy tools. It will, however, require more nimble financial tools to support specific efforts – for instance, to mitigate particular risk factors for conflict or help local parties work toward a more stable political deal that serves their citizens better than war. The money for such tools is there, in the geographic envelope of the NDICI or its successor. As the momentum around Global Gateway shows, what is needed is the political signal and the practical packaging, in the form of a specific set of more flexible, adaptable programming modalities. This could be branded as part of a defense package that goes beyond capability investment and industrial policy, or a renewed effort to step up implementation of the EU's Integrated Approach to External Conflicts and Crises[37] as part of the Commission president's "new era for European Defence and Security."[38]

Whatever form solutions take, there should be a clearly articulated recognition of the need to prioritize strategic investments in peace and security not just in the EU's neighborhood but beyond. These investments should be part of the core – and, in some places, the core – of the EU's engagement with the respective countries or regions. The relevant financial instruments must also be as flexible as necessary to be effective. This course of action is the opposite of the EU's current withdrawal from fragile and conflict-affected contexts and its draining of the few instruments which could respond to critical moments to influence the conflict cycle toward peace. The current approach will only undermine EU values and, inevitably, make the EU less safe and less prosperous. A geopolitical EU needs to recognize that.

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