

The EU and the Comprehensive Approach

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1. What does the Comprehensive Approach mean for the EU?

The expression “Comprehensive Approach” is used by many people to mean many different things. In recent debates, two definitions have been used by EU policy-makers, one broad and one narrower.

The broad understanding

The broader understanding of the Comprehensive Approach for the EU is an integrated EU approach towards a third country or towards another region or group of countries. An integrated approach means that the EU has a set of objectives developed by and agreed to by all relevant EU institutions and it then has policies, “tools”, and activities to implement these objectives. Both the objectives and the activities may be contained in a strategy towards the country or region in question. The expression a whole-of-EU approach is also used to describe the broader understanding of the Comprehensive Approach; it draws on concepts of “whole-of-government” approaches and efforts to unify the UN (e.g. “one UN at country level” and lead agency policies).

The narrower understanding

There is also a narrower understanding of the Comprehensive Approach for the EU, which defines it as civil-military integration. This understanding implicitly or explicitly limits the Comprehensive Approach to crisis management. It is similar in some respects to the definitions of a Comprehensive Approach to crisis management used by NATO (although for NATO, as a military alliance, the focus on the Comprehensive Approach is on cooperation with external civilian actors whereas for the EU a Comprehensive Approach to crisis management is firstly internal – concerned with bringing together military and civilian CSDP). A Comprehensive Approach to crisis management is already part of EU policy, as set out in the Council Conclusions of December 2008.

A comprehensive approach to what...

The Comprehensive Approach discussion is further confused by disagreement over the object of the comprehensive approach. Within a broader definition the focus of the Comprehensive Approach is external – it as can be described as follows:

The comprehensive approach OF the EU TOWARDS a particular country or region.

This paper uses the short-hand “an EU Comprehensive Approach” for the above definition. In narrower definitions, the Comprehensive Approach remains internal, e.g. the Comprehensive Approach to crisis management, mentioned above, or the comprehensive approach to crisis response, to conflict prevention etc.

Beyond Crisis Response

Limiting the EU's Comprehensive Approach to crisis response would also render it too narrow to be useful. Responding to crises is one small part of the EU's external action and is also an area that will always prove difficult for the EU, given the complexity of EU decision-making. A Comprehensive Approach that enables the EU to be more effective at preventive action would play to its advantages.

In addition, there is a risk that process of developing an EU Comprehensive Approach is hijacked by a separate debate about the role of the EEAS in crisis response. It would be useful to disentangle these two issues. The involvement of the EEAS in crisis response including response to humanitarian disasters and in particular the attempts by the EEAS to coordinate all EU response to crises, again including humanitarian assistance, is controversial. Rightly or wrongly, there are suspicions that a new Communication on the Comprehensive Approach is an attempt to consolidate the crisis response role of the EEAS.

...in order to meet which objectives?

The objectives of EU external action are set out in the Lisbon Treaty and include the following:

- 'promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples' (Art. 3.1)
- 'preserve peace, prevent conflicts and strengthen international security' (Art. 21.2(c)).

The purpose of an EU Comprehensive Approach is to enable the EU to better meet these objectives.

EPLO discussion points

- The EU needs to develop a Comprehensive Approach based on the broad understanding described above. Limiting the discussion to crisis management is too limited because it will not tackle the problems of duplication, fragmentation and competition that exist within the EU. A EU Comprehensive Approach has to be broad in order to enable the EU to meet the objectives of its external action, including prevention of conflict.
- Crisis management should be one part of an overall Comprehensive Approach for the EU. For example, CSDP missions should be used as one tool within an overall EU strategy towards a particular country or region.
- For CSDP missions in general, and military CSDP in particular, there are many experiences from the UN's and NATO's application of a Comprehensive Approach which could be studied and applied, for example on protection of civilians, cooperation or communication with civil society and de-conflicting. Here, NATO's experience is particularly relevant, notably the reforms that culminated in the creation of CCOMC.
- The object of the Comprehensive Approach is external – a country or region or organisation. It implies bringing together all relevant parts of the EU to work together with a common strategy towards an external object.

2. Depth of the EU Comprehensive Approach

Integration, coordination, cooperation, communication

There are different understandings of the depth of a comprehensive approach. EPLO has previously drawn a distinction between integration and coordination. To this could be added other relationships between actors in conflict-affected countries:

Integration: All relevant institutions are brought together to develop common objectives and strategies and then work jointly towards meeting them.

Coordination: Different institutions develop their own objectives and work towards meeting them but coordinate, that is, share information (usually at coordination meetings) about what they are separately doing.

Cooperation: Different actors (not necessarily all part of the EU) work together but are not part of the same institutional structures and do not (necessarily) share overall objectives and strategies.

Communication: Different actors provide information about what they are each doing.

EPLO discussion points

- EPLO has long argued for an integrated approach by the EU, meaning that the core EU institutions have a common approach. Beyond that, they may coordinate with other actors, cooperate and communicate as necessary. Using the definitions above, the Comprehensive Approach entails integration. If it is simply a model of coordination, then that is what already exists (to some extent) and it is not worth continuing to invest time in the process.
- Part of the debate on the EU Comprehensive Approach is about which part of the EU system will be integrated and which should not be. A second question then arises: if certain EU actors are not integrated into a comprehensive approach, what should be the relationship between them and parts of the system which are integrated?

3. EU policies and actors to be part of an EU Comprehensive Approach

Ideally the comprehensive approach would cover all EU external policy areas, e.g. taking a truly Comprehensive Approach to country X in EU external action implies that all policies with an external dimension should be included in it. This is surely unrealistic given the battle to ensure that some policies remain outside the Comprehensive Approach. Certain policies remain “untouchable”, in particular trade policy, where, despite the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty, trade tends to remain a separate policy area.

An EU Comprehensive Approach could include *integration* of EU external policies and *coordination* with other EU policies which have an external dimension or implications for EU external action. Thus, integration of CFSP, Development, Humanitarian assistance and coordination with Trade, Fisheries, JLS, etc.

Partially external actors: The Member States

The inclusion of the EU Member States in an EU Comprehensive Approach has various dimensions:

- EU Member States as decision-makers in EU policy have to be part of a Comprehensive Approach (in the sense of being part of its application by the EU).

- EU Member States as external actors with whom the EU needs to coordinate or cooperate.

The situation is fluid, however. The Member States can choose the extent to which they continue to operate bi-laterally in third countries compared to working through the EU system. This includes decisions on the amount of development assistance that they pool; whether or not they use the new option of joint programming of development assistance as set out in the Global Europe Communication; whether they develop pooling and sharing options under CSDP; the number of common positions they take towards third countries on the diplomatic side; the extent to which they act as a block in international for and so on.

Wholly external actors: third countries, civil society, international organisations

The argument has been made – many times – that the EU should focus less on questions of internal “coherence” and more on building up its relationships with external actors. In particular, with third-country governments, be they “partner” or “host country” governments or powerful states also active in countries and regions where the EU is active (some of which are now grouped as “strategic partners”). In addition, the EU has committed to working with civil society in many regions and has complex working – and funding – relationships with multilateral organisations such as UN agencies and the World Bank.

There might be cooperation or coordination between the EU and the external actors but the latter cannot be part of an EU comprehensive approach given that they are independent, external actors.

EPLO discussion points

- The proliferation of European actors (EU and Member States) in many conflict-affected countries is limiting effectiveness; it is also simply not commensurate with the relative power of Europe and European countries.
- The importance of coordination by external actors in particular countries has long been recognised; collective action – integrated action – goes beyond this. The EU has served as vehicle for collective European action but it could do more; above all the EEAS needs to function effectively in order to gain the trust and support of the Member States. Based on our discussions with Member States, it is those that want the EEAS to succeed that are most frustrated with the current state of affairs. On the other hand, many Member States do not recognise their declining influence and struggle to overcome their need for visibility.
- The development of an EU Comprehensive Approach could allow greater involvement of Member States in EU decision-making. If the Comprehensive Approach makes the EU more effective then it will provide a greater incentive for Member States to work increasingly (if not exclusively) through the EU.
- Rather than detracting from building up functional working relationships with external actors, ideally a Comprehensive Approach should enable the development of better external relations (indeed, this is one of the key reasons for it.)

4. Tools for application of a Comprehensive Approach by the EU

The EU has developed new tools for the application of a Comprehensive Approach, notably the regional strategies and programming guidelines, where Country Strategy Papers are now one of three options.

If a Comprehensive Approach communication is agreed it will need to be accompanied by or followed by instructions and guidance on the processes for its application.

In practice, an EU Comprehensive Approach would look something like the following:

- Joint – or at least shared – analysis across the EU institutions.
- Joint programming and/or planning to develop common strategies and programmes setting out shared objectives and priorities.
- Division of responsibilities.
- Actions – each EU institutions plays its own separate role but within the overall agreed strategy.

5. A Comprehensive Approach for the EU: dilemmas and discussion points

Opposition to the Comprehensive Approach

Opposition to the current development of the Comprehensive Approach seems to derive in part from the fear of loss of power or subversion of principles. The following can be gleaned from the public discussions.

CSDP – certain Member States are concerned that an EU Comprehensive Approach broadly defined will reduce the prominence of CSDP by integrating it as one tool within an overall EU strategy. In addition, their fear is that this will limit development of CSDP and in particular that it will limit the development and use of military CSDP.

Humanitarian assistance – ECHO and humanitarian NGOs are concerned that an EU Comprehensive Approach will put at risk the principles of independence and impartiality that are at the heart of humanitarian work. In addition, there may be a fear that an EU Comprehensive Approach will consolidate the trend towards coordination of EU response to crises – including humanitarian crises – by the EEAS. Wider concerns about the EEAS' involvement in EU humanitarian assistance may come into play.

Development assistance – certain actors in development are concerned that an EU Comprehensive Approach may lead to “politicisation” of development assistance. (It is assumed that this means the use of development assistance to meet political goals which conflict with the stated goals of development assistance.)

EPLO discussion points:

- It would be useful for those who have concerns about an EU Comprehensive Approach to speak more openly when possible; while diplomatic language is important the cryptic references included in many of the public presentations on Comprehensive Approach are serving to further confuse the issue.
- The EEAS needs to provide adequate reassurance that the possible integration of development policies and humanitarian assistance into an EU Comprehensive Approach would respect the principles for management of these policies and activities, to which the EU is committed.

Is it really worth developing a new policy on the EU Comprehensive Approach?

Given the opposition described above, one could question the value of developing an EU Comprehensive Approach. In addition, it could be argued that without institutional integration, a Comprehensive Approach will not be possible in practice.

The institutional set up following the Lisbon Treaty missed many opportunities to create a more integrated approach by the EU, due to resistance by parts of the Commission, Member States and others. It could be argued that a Comprehensive Approach is not possible in a situation of institutional fragmentation. For example, the EU's response to conflict is currently divided across at least five different institutions and structures, leading to duplication and time wasted in coordination. Will new policy actually be able to change this if there is a lack of institutional integration?

The development of a Comprehensive Approach Communication and its application will simply lead to a continuation of discussions on the need for "coherence" without any actual change. The argument could also be made that the Comprehensive Approach is something that you do, not something that you talk about. Finally, there is a risk that what results is simply more coordination, i.e. more meetings for different parts of the EU to explain what they are separately doing.

Valid concerns have also been raised that a Comprehensive Approach may lead to a loss of some of the more effective and principled parts of EU external action.

On the other hand, the argument can be made that the Communication on the Comprehensive Approach (and the EEAS review) are opportunities to rectify problems created by or not addressed by decisions on implementation of the Lisbon Treaty.

EPLO discussion points:

- Additional policy on an EU Comprehensive Approach could be useful because without it, the EU will remain fragmented, a situation which leads to the risk of inefficiency, duplication of activities, and exploitation of differences within the EU by external actors.
- The main reason why EPLO supports integrated action by the EU is that a wealth of evidence now shows that external actors need to be better integrated in order to effectively support peace in conflict-affected countries. The EU itself needs a more integrated approach and in addition it needs to be able to serve as a vehicle for collective European action based on normative commitments, which in turn requires better integration.
- It is only worth developing a comprehensive approach if a broader understanding is used; civil-military integration within EU crisis management is a separate, ongoing issue (see previous EPLO comments). Similarly, a focus on crisis response will only exacerbate ongoing problems linked to the attempts to promote coordination of crisis response by the EEAS.
- Any additional policy commitments, such as a new Communication on the Comprehensive Approach need to be backed up by instructions, processes, guidelines and management to ensure that it is put into practice.