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The Americanisation of European foreign policy

The EU wants to create stability and peace outside Europe – by providing guns, ammunition and training. This strategy will fail

Read this article in German.

Amid the decline of *pax americana*, European governments are more and more eager to join the global race for power. Following the example of the US and other great powers, they seem convinced that providing guns, ammunition and training to partners overseas is a necessary component of that ambition – and will eventually lead to more stability and peace.

EU High Representative Josep Borrell argued during his inaugural visit to the African Union: 'We need guns, we need arms, we need military capacities and that is what we are going to help provide to our African friends because their security is our security.'

This gradual shift is nowhere more evident – and surprising – than in Germany. At first glance, Borrell's war rhetoric may seem incompatible with the German culture of military restraint. The country has enshrined its commitment to world peace in its constitution and has historically been among the largest supporters of reconstruction and peacebuilding. But in the past years Germany has expanded its crisis management toolbox with military instruments and recently increased its military spending by 10 per cent to USD 49.3bn.

Since 2016, the German Federal Foreign Office jointly with the Ministry of Defence have been supporting military and border forces in Burkina Faso, Gambia, Iraq, Jordan, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia and Tunisia as part of its 'Enable and enhance initiative'. Since 2017, €130 million per year has been spent on these programmes. A few days ago, the Bundestag decided that the Bundeswehr will extend its training courses in Mali to neighbouring countries. On top of that, the instructors are to be deployed closer to the battlefields and will teach more combat skills.

Meanwhile, EU member states plan to allocate billions of euros to the European Defence Fund (EDF) and for capacity building of military actors. In Brussels, negotiations on the creation of a so-called European Peace Facility (EPF) are reaching crunch time. The 'Peace Facility' would supposedly enable the EU to intervene 'more robustly' in crisis contexts. Behind the euphonious name lies a multi-billion-euro instrument, allowing the EU – for the first time in its history – to provide ammunition and lethal weapons to security forces outside Europe. In the negotiations, Germany's Federal Government is a vehement advocate of the new instrument.

Two failing arguments

Two arguments are used to justify the new European security initiatives.

First, officials argue that there can be no development without security and that security can only be achieved through military means. The German Development Minister repeatedly invokes this nexus of security and development. However, this approach disregards the possibility that boosting the capabilities of repressive partners can aggravate instability. Whereas responsive and accountable security institutions are an essential part of development, current train-and-equip security partnerships have not been effective in promoting genuine reform. Given that the crises encircling Europe are largely driven by marginalisation and repression, providing European weapons and know-how to unreformed security forces is hardly a panacea. On the contrary, international counter-terrorism support to abusive security forces has fuelled grievances, allowed armed groups to grow and exacerbated violence and civilian casualties.

The EU's strategy for achieving influence and building stability needs to apply the sobering lessons of both the Cold War and War on Terror eras.

The military-first strategy applied in the Sahel, for example, has neglected inclusive political dialogue and conflict transformation efforts, exacerbated violence and grievances – and thus undermined peace and development. In Afghanistan, the US alone has spent USD 137bnonly on state-building and Afghan security forces since 2001. Adjusted for inflation, that is more than the US spent on the Marshall Plan after World War II. The result? A country devastated by war and corruption, and a fragile peace deal with the Taliban that could erase all reconstruction efforts.

A second argument for military assistance is that if Europe does not equip its partners, China and Russia will. Amid increasing geopolitical competition, Europe wants to 'learn the language of power' and fill the space left by the US, by supplying arms that come with a European flag and – allegedly – European values. But hopes that European security assistance will succeed where US efforts have failed too readily ignore decades of failure in security partnerships and state-building efforts underpinned by 'American exceptionalism'.

The EU's strategy for achieving influence and building stability needs to apply the sobering lessons of both the Cold War and War on Terror eras. Counterinsurgency campaigns waged in partnership with corrupt allies in Vietnam and Central America failed to eliminate their opponents and provide the basis for peace and development. Recently, the US government revealed that arms deliveries to Syrian opposition groups valued at over USD 700 million have disappeared without trace onto the Syrian battlefield. The 'Islamic State' is fighting with arms made by European states and in Somalia security equipment has been diverted to armed groups. Decisions to arm partners can have unintended repercussions for decades.

What reality has to say

Recent international experience in Mali, Libya and Niger points to the continuation of familiar patterns in military aid: in fragile settings, elites and security agencies take what they can get from competing external players, without solving the security problems they have themselves often created. Such elites often force donors to choose between immediate migration or counter-terror targets and higher ideals regarding human rights and protection of civilians – typically leading to failure on all fronts.

In Mali, mass human rights violations by soldiers during counter-terrorism operations are fuelling conflict and pushing people to seek protection from armed groups. The EU Training Mission in Mali has proven unable to prevent such atrocities, even by the soldiers it has trained itself. Public opinion in Mali is turning fiercely against French counter-terrorism operations and, by participating in these activities, Germany and other EU member states risk becoming complicit in feeding instability.

Building sustainable peace and stability in Europe's neighbourhood is not

Thus, if the EU buys into the 'arms and influence race' with rival powers, arming and training partners in fragile settings is highly likely to intensify chaos on its doorstep and

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further embolden the likes of Russia and Turkey.

By providing training and equipment to security forces in fragile contexts under the banner of 'peace', the Germany and the EU risk losing their reputation and leverage as a global champion of peace, rights and development. Siding with non-democratic governments, it also risks of becoming a party to the conflict leaving societies with more corruption, poverty, inequality and grievances.

An alternative security strategy

However, Europe does need a credible strategy for engaging with a turbulent global environment. Its security is inconceivable without peaceful democratic change in its neighbourhood. As the world moves towards tough, nationalistic security approaches, the EU and Germany must defend multilateralism and help societies address issues that drive conflict. This can be best achieved by addressing marginalisation, promoting gender equality, and supporting communities' access to services and justice. Bottom-up 'community security' models, rather than support for elites, can help societies bargain for better security and justice systems that benefit everyone. The prevention of violent conflict is more effective, cheaper and more sustainable than the management of violent crises.

The EPF presents a fundamental and dangerous change in the direction of EU foreign policy. In fragile settings, Europe and Germany must ask themselves whether they want to build long-term stability and development, or merely to enable repression and arms proliferation in the name of flexing its muscles.

Covid-19 is showing the public that military investments have proven a poor insurance policy in a world where the main threats stem from complex social, economic, political and environmental challenges. Handing out guns is not part of the solution to such systemic threats. If EPF investments do turn sour, public opinion will judge it harshly.

Building sustainable peace and stability in Europe's neighbourhood is not about 'winning peace' by 'doing war', as Borrell has suggested. Instead of making Germany and other European countries complicit in creating grievance, conflict and instability, it is time for European governments to consider the evidence carefully and craft a more cogent peace doctrine.



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