SWP Comments

Stiftung
Wissenschaft und
Politik

German Institute
for International and
Security Affairs

SWP
1962–2012

The EU and Peacebuilding

South Sudan and the Sahel Indicate That the Union Is Rethinking Its Concepts but Not Yet Changing Its Policies

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Peacebuilding – understood as a broad range of activities to solidify peace and avoid the relapse into violent conflict – has become central to the self-conception of the EU as a foreign policy actor. The concept has been making inroads into different EU policy areas such as security and defence, development cooperation, enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy. At the same time, the dominant approach to peacebuilding has increasingly come under fire because of its failure to produce durable peace in many countries. The European Union has reacted to these challenges by adapting its concepts, but translation of these into practice – as currently witnessed in the Sahel and the two Sudans – is proving more difficult.

The dominant international approach to peacebuilding – often referred to as "liberal peace" – has been increasingly criticised by politicians, scholars and other commentators for failing to produce sustainable peace in many countries. More specifically, what is being questioned is the tendency to transplant *specific* understandings of liberalism while ignoring local circumstances, and the focus on state-level structures while ignoring other sub-state and non-state actors. Due to the multilateral character of the EU and the multilateral nature of peacebuilding itself, the Union's policies have been strongly informed and shaped by broader international developments, particularly within the United Nations.

While much of the criticism of peacebuilding attempts has been accepted by the key peacebuilding actors, the proper implementation of these lessons is much slower and much more difficult. The UN itself has only started institutionally addressing critiques of extant approaches to peacebuilding. The same holds true for the European Union.

Rethinking (Liberal) Peacebuilding

For the last 20 years, peacebuilding has been dominated by the "liberal peace consensus". It is based on an assumption that democratic and liberal modes of governance can be transplanted from the inter-

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vening states to sites of intervention. The core of peacebuilding has in fact been state-building, that is, the strengthening and construction of legitimate governmental institutions.

In practice, attempts to build sustainable peace have included two components, both of which are increasingly being challenged:

(1) Policies and instruments have focussed on top-down approaches of institution-strengthening at (central-) state level, mainly involving government elites. By contrast, the inclusion of non-state actors in peace implementation has been of secondary importance. Only through attentiveness to the relationship between state institutions and non-state actors and inclusion of civil society in the peacebuilding process can states gain legitimacy and peace become entrenched. A related concern is that top-down approaches have privileged the security issues over longer-term development, therefore undermining the sustainability of peace arrangements.

(2) Peace operations have often relied on either direct imposition of reforms (such as through interim international administrations) or more often on an indirect imposition through conditionality (for example, of the EU or financial institutions). These instruments have been criticised for their reliance on external solutions that neglect to incorporate local circumstances and knowledge. In some instances, heavy-handed interventions have managed to stifle domestic incentives and failed to bring change. For example, it is often argued that EU conditionality in Bosnia and Herzegovina produced reforms on paper that were never fully implemented. Interventions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) have been haunted by similar problems.

These critiques and prescriptions on how to overcome the problems associated with them are interlinked. One way the United Nations have tried to address these concerns is by establishing the Peacebuilding Commission in 2005. This body is specifically mandated to focus on longer-term developments and encourage broad participation of various stakeholders through the post-war transition.

Towards a New EU Peacebuilding Approach?

The European Union has also put its policies towards partners in unstable regions under scrutiny. In the course of the current review of the EU's multiannual financial framework, the Union is reforming its instruments in order to better deal with post-conflict transitions in partner countries. This involves a simplification of financial rules, flexibility by making more funds available on short notice, and incorporating a broader set of local actors beyond government elites. Finally, the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy suggested elaborating "Joint Framework Documents", which would integrate short- and longer-term aspects of EU external action vis-à-vis partner countries. All this suggests that the EU is reacting to critiques of peacebuilding and attempting to integrate them into its thinking.

However, to what extent these general policy prescriptions will translate into a new EU peacebuilding approach in practice remains to be seen. It is thus useful to look at specific cases of EU interventions, especially those that have been planned more recently. Because of path-dependencies and structural "lock-ins", it is much harder to change the course of peacebuilding endeavours that have been going on for many years, such as in Afghanistan or the DRC. New approaches and thinking should thus be more detectible in relatively recent missions.

South Sudan and the Sahel region have climbed up high on the EU's peacebuilding agenda. Both provide good examples of peacebuilding attempts where the EU has tried to address some of the critiques of liberal peacebuilding in its own actions.

South Sudan

Following South Sudan's independence from Sudan in July 2011, both countries have resurfaced as a target for international peacebuilding efforts. The situation in South Sudan is characterised by a complex emergency, where security problems are connected with developmental and humanitarian ones.

The EU is the second largest donor to South Sudan (after the United States). Its major political engagement dates back to 2005, when Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed. From 2010 to 2013, the EU has allocated €285 million in development funds to South Sudan. This aid targets the agriculture sector, education sector, health facilities and judiciary.

In its policies towards Sudan and South Sudan, the EU has attempted to develop bottom-up approaches. With that in mind, some key EU projects have been implemented by non-governmental actors from EU countries with broad knowledge of developments in the country. This includes, for instance, a project under the Peace Building Initiative with the aim to promote cross-border dialogue between communities in the border area with Sudan.

The overall scope of these projects and their connection to the EU's long-term engagements remain limited however. The newly established European Union Aviation Security Mission (EUAVSEC) is a technical mission without any executive tasks. Its main role is to train and improve aviation security at Juba International Airport. In addition to the EU, a number of member states (in particular the United Kingdom, France, Italy and Netherlands) have been very active in political processes in South Sudan, working in parallel to collective engagements. Their short-term interventions seem to be better integrated with their long-term ones, exposing an additional gap between intergovernmental and communitarian actions at the EU level.

Another concern about EU peacebuilding in South Sudan relates to the question of effectiveness of any policy without sufficient presence of the European Union in Juba. While there is a small Delegation in Juba, the EU Special Representative operates from outside the country. As such, the EU interventions into the political process have been directed primarily at elites, trying to facilitate dialogue at the highest levels instead of engaging in a broader consultation.

Sahel

Political upheavals in Northern Africa, including the military conflict in Libya, have had a destabilising impact on the Sahel countries. In January 2012 Mali experienced a rebellion, followed by a coup d'état in March. Already before 2011, the region epitomised the combination of fragile statehood and transnational security concerns.

The EU has supported the Sahel countries under the European Development Fund. As of 2011, ongoing or programmed assistance from the Fund and other EU sources to the Sahel totalled more than €600 million. In 2012, the EU and member states mobilised additional resources, including humanitarian assistance to deal with the food crisis in Sahel. The main focus of assistance is on governance – specifically support for decentralisation, economic development of rural and peripheral areas as well as general budget support to fight poverty.

In March 2011 the Council endorsed the EU's "Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel". Its geographical focus is on Mali, Niger and Mauritania, while its design is meant to be comprehensive, supporting "the states and legitimate non-state actors".

A closer look at the Strategy reveals, however, that the paper is clearly dominated by security concerns, including arms proliferation, organised crime, terrorism and the protection of EU interests and citizens. Even though the EU aims to support administrative decentralisation, development of peripheral regions and civil society, the general direction of the Sahel strategy is

clearly top-down, with a focus on state-elites, government institutions and state security forces. This is reinforced by the policy's focus on security sector capacity-building, including by the newly adopted civilian Common Security and Defence Policy mission entitled the European Union Capacity Building Mission in Niger (EUCAP Sahel Niger).

The EU's Sahel Strategy document takes into consideration a number of local circumstances. For instance it contains precautions against policies that might alienate local and traditional leaders. Yet, in practice, the EU's support for the extension of state security forces into Northern Mali and Niger seems to have done just that. In the end, the extension of state authority is a major goal of EU support for these countries, putting into question whether the EU has done enough to foster dialogue with "legitimate non-state actors" as is explicitly foreseen in the Strategy. These experiences also open the question of how to identify legitimate actors for cooperation.

Conclusions

The implementation of the peacebuilding agenda has been increasingly challenged for its very mixed results. There is thus a need to question the dominant approach on the basis of practical experience and lessons learnt. With its polycentric structure of (foreign) policy-making, its need for consensus among institutions and member states, and its resultant tendency to treat external relations mostly in technical terms, the EU is particularly pressed to rethink its actions.

On a conceptual level, the EU has reacted to the major criticisms towards liberal peace by emphasising priorities that go beyond state elites and address local circumstances. At the same time, however, the way the EU is dealing with new peacebuilding challenges on the ground, as witnessed in South Sudan and Sahel, suggests that it is in fact still following its old paths. The EU has to rethink its own instruments so that they can better connect emergency responses with longer-term approaches. For that, a better link between member states and intergovernmental approaches on one side and communitarian approaches on the other side is needed. Additionally, as EU peacebuilding is necessarily dependent on UN policies, an active role in the development of these policies is crucial.

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ISSN 1861-1761