



**ASSESSING THE EU'S JOINT COMMUNICATION
ON THE COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH:
*IMPLICATIONS FOR EU CRISIS RESPONSE
AND CONFLICT PREVENTION***

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Abstract

On 11 December 2013, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Commission published their *Joint Communication on 'The EU's Comprehensive Approach to external conflict and crises'*. Long-awaited in academic and policy circles, the 12-page document builds on a variety of aspects already flagged up in the EEAS mid-term review, but offers for the first time an official EU position paper on the often elusive concept of the EU's 'Comprehensive Approach'.

This *GGI Briefing Paper* provides a critical analysis of the Joint Communication and assesses its proposals in the context of the EU's on-going post-Lisbon institutional transformations and policy advances in the field of early warning, conflict prevention and crisis response. The paper argues that important progress has been made mostly at the EU-*internal* level of the comprehensive approach, namely in the fields of institution-building, the development of early warning indicators and the facilitation of information-gathering and information-flows. Yet, the *external* dimension of the EU's comprehensive approach (i.e., the EU's cooperation with key international and regional organizations) remains woefully underdeveloped and needs to be addressed urgently in parallel to internal reforms.

GGI Briefing Paper

Introduction: Institutional Progress and Causes for Hope

While the *Joint Communication* stresses some recurrent features, it is important to note at the outset that some potentially far-reaching *post-Lisbon* transformations and changes have taken place in particular within and between the European Union's core institutions dealing with crisis response, conflict prevention and security-related policies.

Under HR/VP Ashton, substantial institutional innovations have been advanced, particularly within the European External Action Service (EEAS), with the aim of giving some real substance to the 'comprehensive approach'. In particular, the creation of the *Crisis Response and Operational Coordination Department (CR&OC)*, including the new institutional coordination tool of the so-called 'Crisis Platform' as well as the early warning 'Situation room', provide important advances towards promoting a more coherent and more responsive EU approach to international crises. Spurred by the lessons from the EU's inadequate and uncoordinated response to the Haiti earthquake in 2010, HR/VP Ashton has promoted a strong emphasis on the development of new crisis response structures and has advanced some tentative experiments in the field of conflict prevention and mediation in order to improve the internal conditions for a more tangible implementation of the 'comprehensive approach'. This paper discusses the *Joint Communication* in the context of the institutional and organizational developments in the EEAS since 2011.

Significant Internal Institutional Advances: The Added Value of the EEAS Crisis Platform

Following the Haiti earthquake, HR/VP Ashton focused on advancing institutions, tools and enabling the EU to become more coherent and effective in responding to both natural disasters and man-made conflicts. The result has been a more comprehensive and rapid approach to 'complex crises'.

The creation of the *Crisis Response and Operational Coordination Department (CR&OC)* in December 2010 represented a far-reaching important step forward. The declared purpose of the Department is to advance 'crisis response' as a key policy and flexible instrument that could be used in the first phase of a crisis. Moreover, the Department was tasked to advance a more

coordinated EU approach that would link short-term responses with more long-term tools (such as development instruments, sanctions and long-term CSDP missions).

A major institutional innovation and coordination tool introduced by the CR&OC Department has been the *EU Crisis Platform*, which brings together *the geographic services with Commission and EEAS departments responsible for conflict prevention, crisis response, peace building, financial support including humanitarian aid where appropriate, security policy and CSDP*, as well as the General Secretariat of the EU Council. First activated in the context of the Libyan crisis, the EU Crisis Platform also served as a coordination tool for crises faced by the EU during the last two years (i.e. Mali, CAR, Syria and Yemen). Critics have questioned the value of the new Department as a 'mini-CSDP' and as a rival to the CSDP institutions. Yet, the creation of the Crisis Platform was aimed at both overcoming the lengthy bureaucratic decision-making of CSDP and at providing a single institutional point of contact for information-sharing and coordination for all major EU actors involved in crisis response. This role has been acknowledged and confirmed by the *Joint Communication* and can be expected to increase further.¹

Flow of Information as a key element: EU Situation Room or Emergency Response Centre?

A second key initiative introduced by the CR&OC Department was the establishment of the *EU Situation Room*. Serving as a 24/7 situational awareness capability for the European Union, it is supposed to be the single point of contact during a crisis. The EU Situation Room is a civil-military information centre staffed by approximately 30 officers, dealing with open source analysis and the collection of information provided by EU actors, including EU Delegations, member states, EU CSDP operations and missions as well as other external International Organizations.² However, instead of

¹ See 'The EU's comprehensive approach to external conflict and crises', HR/VP-Commission Joint Communication to the EP & Council, 11.12.2013, p. 7

² The EU Situation Room, established on 15 June 2010 integrates elements from the EU Situation Centre (SitCen), the *Watchkeeping Capability*, the former Commission RELEX Crisis Room and several other elements from the EU Council, like the Crisis

creating a quick solution both the CR&OC as well as the Situation room have shown very strongly the need for more integration between the different Information Gathering tools within the EU. This not only features prominently in the Joint Communication³, but it had also been stressed even more strongly in the EEAS mid-term review, which recommended merging the different instruments dealing with the flow of information (the Emergency Response Centre of DG ECHO, but also the Strategic Analysis and Response Capability of DG HOME) into a single mechanism for situational awareness and crisis information analysis.

The current thinking among senior EEAS officials is to move the EEAS Situation Room under the authority of DG ECHO. Yet, this might create more problems than it is supposed to solve. The EEAS and DG ECHO have two different, to some extent rather incompatible mandates. DG ECHO, maintaining the humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality, deals with non-military crisis response, such as Humanitarian Aid. Moving the EEAS Situation Room (which also deals with military approaches to crisis response) to ECHO's Emergency Response Centre would imply that all military aspects would have to remain outside the purview of this new merged centre.

Another issue to be resolved is the question of the right lead and coordination in the field of Civil Protection of EU citizens affected by large-scale disasters inside or outside the EU. At present both DG ECHO and the *Consular Crisis Management Division* of the CR&OC are tasked in this area (with the help of the Consular OnLine instrument under the Consular Division). In future, a more synergetic approach needs to be developed in this critical area. Otherwise, in the event of a major crises, the danger of a classical case of duplication and parallel efforts emerge. One possibility might be to move DG ECHO's civil protection mandate to a separate overarching instrument that could serve both DG ECHO's humanitarian approach and the EEAS' crisis response.

A small, but important step forward: Conflict Prevention & Early Warning Division

The creation of a *Directorate for Conflict Prevention and Security Policy* underlines the importance attached by the HR/VP and the EEAS to develop a self-standing division and tools for EU Conflict Prevention, Peace-building and Mediation. Yet, closer cooperation and coordination of this division with the CR&OC and CSDP institution needs to be promoted as a matter of urgency. The *Joint Communication* leaves this issue unresolved. As highlighted by the mid-term review⁴ and the most recent EEAS Organigram (1 October 2013), the CR&OC Department, as well as the EU Intelligence Analysis Centre (INTCEN) are still left outside the "Security Policy and CSDP Structure". In order to give full effect to a comprehensive approach, the aforementioned institutions (dealing, inter alia, with prevention, crisis response and CSDP) need to become further integrated. While their different roles need to be respected, this should not distract from the need for a common single strategy to tackle complex crises.

Advances in Early Warning

Advances have also been made in the field of early warning. Since October 2011, the newly created Conflict Prevention, Peacebuilding and Mediation Division has been tasked with the development of an early warning indicators. As outlined in the *Joint Communication*, the Division is currently working on piloting projects for an eventual overall EU early warning matrix. However, at present various divisions within the EEAS (such as the EU Military Staff for CSDP, the CR&OC for Crisis Response) as well as Early Warning Systems in DG ECHO's Emergency Response Centre and Early Warning indicators in DG Home develop different early warning matrices in parallel. Without top-down harmonization, this duplication of early warning indicators render an EU-wide approach to early warning impossible. For the development of an EU comprehensive approach to the detection of root causes of potential conflicts and crises, a

Coordination Arrangements' team, CCA). It can be seen as a conscious effort for advancing more integration in the field of situational awareness.

³ See Heading 'Develop Shared Analysis', p. 5 of the Joint Communication

⁴ The EEAS Mid-term Review suggested to "confirm co-ordinating responsibility for Deputy Secretary General for CSDP and Security Policy and Crisis Prevention departments, including their relations with the rest of the EEAS". This seems to ignore the Crisis Response component. Summary of Proposals for Change Short-term recommendations, point 3, p.16

single approach to early warning is therefore urgently needed. Even though each institution has different mandates and strategic priorities it is nevertheless vital to generate a basic shared understanding from which then different (institution-specific) strategic actions and responses can be generated.

The (Missing) External Dimension of the EU's Comprehensive Approach: A Long Way to Go

Whilst the *Joint Communication* addresses EU-internal aspects at length, the 12-page document only devotes a mere 10 lines to the *external* dimension of the Comprehensive Approach. Given the importance of promoting coherent and mutually reinforcing relations with key international partners in the field – above all the United Nations, NATO, the African Union and the OSCE – the extremely fleeting reference to inter-organizational partnerships is rather puzzling. Whilst EU-NATO relations have been dormant during the last five years, strong advances have been made in the area of UN-EU cooperation. Indeed, the adoption of the EU-UN Action Plan, the reformed UN-EU Steering Committee meetings and the reinforced UN Liaison Office for Peace and Security have placed the UN-EU relationship on a strong institutional footing during the last 2 years. Yet, without a clear strategic dialogue and closer coordination of joint planning, lessons learned and systematic cooperation in the field, the external impact of the EU's comprehensive approach will remain limited.

Similarly, the development of early warning indicators should, at least on a most basic level, be coordinated in a dialogue with the EU's key external partners (NATO, UN and African Union). Whilst each organization will pursue different objectives, a common understanding of early warning indicators will provide an essential basis for information-sharing and may thus facilitate coordinated responses. In this vein, the EEAS' recent external initiatives of inter-regional cooperation of Crisis Rooms with the aim of establishing a “global network of situational awareness and information exchange” can serve as an important model for future cooperation. Under this scheme, the EEAS has promoted the set-up of EU-type crisis rooms in the Arab League, ASEAN, and African Union. These initiatives could facilitate information-sharing, trust-building and the development of common understandings needed for jointly addressing crisis situations in a comprehensive manner.

However, in order to take full advantage of these unfolding initiatives, dedicated funding should be allocated and an overarching strategy should be more clearly defined with pragmatic, achievable goals. A true comprehensive approach is not exclusive to uniting the EU institutions internally, but also serves for the EU to act in coordination with its external partners.

Conclusions and Recommendations

For nearly two decades now, the aim of building a more coherent and comprehensive approach to major international crises has been at the forefront of EU-internal and public debates. It is clear that the long-awaited *Joint Communication* cannot provide all the answers to the manifold challenges the EU has been confronted with since the early beginnings of its more ambitious external actions. However, at a minimum level, the document provides conceptual clarifications and a common understanding of the meaning of the comprehensive approach, offering a good basis for future initiatives and a common guiding framework for EU crisis response. Institutional advances, such as the creation of the EU Crisis Platform as well as the set-up of the Conflict Prevention, Peacebuilding and Mediation Division, have the potential to give some concrete substance to the implementation of the comprehensive approach. Yet, further clarifications of the potential cooperation as well as pragmatic division of labour between core EEAS-based and Commission-based institutions need to be promoted.

However, the noticeable absence of a strong role for CSDP within the *Joint Communication's* vision for the Comprehensive Approach raises some serious questions about the future of the EU's civilian and military crisis management tools. While the EEAS' Crisis Response institutions might take on important roles of the CSDP instruments, the future of CSDP within the EU's international security approach needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. For the EU's external partners, the document will be disappointing.

In the months to come, a stronger emphasis needs to be placed on the strategic role of the EU's key partners, above all the United Nations, in jointly addressing major international crises. With the necessary institutions in place, the *Joint Communication* now requires all actors involved to work on *comprehensive policies* to external conflict and crises.