

Hard power: Europe's military drift causes alarm

Monday 9 August 2021, by [CAMPBELL Zach](#), [CHANDLER Caitlin](#), [JONES Chris](#) (Date first published: 19 May 2021).

Critics are asking why, if the EU's mission is to promote peace, it wants to use public money to fund the supply of weapons to foreign armies

The EU was awarded the Nobel peace prize in 2012 in recognition of "six decades of promoting peace and reconciliation" in [Europe](#). In his acceptance speech in Oslo, the then president of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, said the world could "count on our efforts to fight for lasting peace, freedom and justice".

Yet less than a decade on, the EU is taking two big steps to bolster its defence capacity and engage in military conflicts through training and equipping governments outside the bloc. In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic these developments have slipped under the radar, but they represent a significant expansion in security policy with wide-ranging consequences.

An €8bn (£6.9bn) European defence fund (EDF), aimed at developing and acquiring new weapons and technology for militaries within the EU and abroad, was agreed last December. The EU also recently launched the [European peace facility](#) (EPF), a mechanism that will boost the bloc's ability to provide training and equipment - including, for the first time, weapons - to non-European military forces around the world.

France and Germany, the commission, and a majority of MEPs have pushed for these tools to boost European power abroad. They point to conflicts in the Middle East, the [Sahel](#) and Ukraine, and the more isolationist direction the US took under the Trump administration, as justification.

The twin initiatives will bolster the EU's economic and diplomatic influence with a hefty dose of "hard power", say advocates who also point to the inefficiency of 27 national militaries acquiring their own new weapons systems. But the measures will also benefit the European arms industry by providing research and development funds and new outlets for arms sales overseas.

"The challenges are coming closer and they are getting more diverse, especially in areas where the Americans tell Europeans: 'Hey! Care for your [own] back yard'," said the German conservative MEP Michael Gahler, who sits on the European parliament's security and defence subcommittee. He says Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea is one of the main factors in driving support for greater EU military involvement. "Don't think of Donald, think of Vladimir," he said.

But a vociferous network of peace activists, critical MEPs and campaigners accuses the EU of abandoning its founding principles and giving in to lobbying from the arms industry for more public funding. "For the first time in the history of the [European Union](#), we have budget lines with military components," said Özlem Demirel, an MEP from Germany and vice-chair of the security and defence subcommittee.

A [legal opinion](#) drafted for Demirel's European parliamentary group argues the EDF is a "manifest

violation” of the EU’s founding treaties, which prohibit use of the bloc’s budget for “operations having military or defence implications”.

‘This is really dangerous’

EU military research began in 2014, when the parliament approved a €1.4m [pilot project](#) on defence research. Gahler was its architect. “We thought ‘OK, we make a start with these nitty-gritty budgetary instruments that we’ve got’,” he said.

This paved the way for a host of other experiments, with the EU providing more than €500m for military research projects between 2017 and 2020 including investments in quantum technologies, artificial intelligence, “directed energy” weapons, “adaptive camouflage” and “real-time cyber threat hunting”.

A spokesperson for the European Commission listed projects that are likely to be funded under the defence fund, including drone technology, “ground-based precision strike capabilities”, and a new generation of ground, air and naval combat platforms.

The long-term goal is to make sure those technologies are created in the EU, the spokesperson said, to be “strategically autonomous, not to rely on other countries” and “to strengthen our capacity to defend ourselves and, of course, European citizens”.

But the plans come with significant risks, said Dr Berenice Boutin, a senior researcher on military operations, international law and artificial intelligence at the Asser Institute in the Netherlands. “The potential applications of AI in the military are much broader than just weapons systems,” Boutin said.

One area of concern is the use of AI in “decision support systems” – for example, where software provides advice on when, where or how to move troops or equipment, or to fire a missile. “It can lead to human decision-making relying heavily on algorithms, where you can question whether there is meaningful control,” said Boutin. Although the European Commission recently released plans to [regulate](#) the use of AI inside the bloc, the current draft does not cover military use.

The EDF is modelled on the security component of the EU’s longstanding civilian research programme now called Horizon Europe. Horizon has backed the development of new technologies such as autonomous surveillance systems, data-mining tools for police forces and drone swarms to control borders.

Ethicists and privacy researchers last year [expressed concerns to the Guardian](#) over the lack of oversight on security research projects funded by Horizon. Potential ethical issues with developing weapons and other military technology will be far worse, say critics of the EDF.

The funding of weapons or other military-specific development is prohibited under the civilian programme. The EDF will be the first major EU initiative that uses public money to fund the development of weapons and technology primarily intended for military use.

“The Commission knows that they are acting in a grey area, because it’s not so easy to put military measures in the budget,” Demirel said, “and this is not just about asymmetric wars, but also bigger wars between economic and military powers in the world. And this is really dangerous.”

‘It increases the risk of harm to civilians’

Despite its name, the European peace facility, worth €5bn over the next seven years, will allow the

EU to provide equipment – including lethal weapons – to non-European militaries. It also offers the EU more freedom of manoeuvre in [Africa](#) than previously, making it possible to provide arms and training directly to national governments and regional actors rather than going through the African Union, as training missions have had to in the past.

Germany's foreign minister, Heiko Maas, has described the facility as “a fundamental investment in peace and stability”. Not everyone sees things this way. Forty human rights organisations have [warned](#) the possibility of providing foreign military forces with lethal weapons would “risk increasing human rights abuses and contribute to further violence and arms proliferation, rather than to protect civilians and search for political solutions”.

The Sahel (which includes Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad) is one region where the peace facility is likely to be used. It is of key strategic interest for the EU, given both France's eight-year military campaign there and the EU's interest in countering migration to Europe. Military and counter-terror interventions in the region have increased year on year since an armed uprising against Mali's government in 2011. EU missions have long trained military, police and border forces in Mali and neighbouring states such as Burkina Faso and Niger, while soldiers from France, Germany, Italy, the UK, the Czech Republic and Estonia are involved in counter-terrorism operations in the region. Training and equipping foreign armies can pose risks to democratic development: the leader of Mali's [2020 coup](#) was a colonel, Assimi Goïta, who was trained by France, Germany and the US.

Despite the presence of foreign forces and a UN peacekeeping mission, violence in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso has sharply increased over the past year. Rather than reconsider its strategy, there are indications the EU intends to scale up its military operations.

An internal European Commission document related to the EU's Mali military mission, obtained by the Guardian, called for a decentralisation of its military assistance activities to the “tactical” level. This would allow the EU to move away from training only the leadership of the Malian army and instead support advising and training regiments in the field. It provides more flexibility in how the EU operates in the Sahel but potentially makes it harder to monitor its activities.

The February 2020 document also called for the mission area to be extended to “cover the whole of Mali”, as well as for increased programmes for the armed forces of Burkina Faso and Niger.

But foreign military intervention in the Sahel's conflicts comes at a high cost. Counter-terrorism campaigns by the governments of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso have resulted in more than 600 unlawful killings since 2019, [according to Human Rights Watch](#). There are concerns the EU's new ability to provide weapons to foreign forces may further inflame such situations. The International Crisis Group (ICG) thinktank has argued that France's military strategy in the Sahel is failing – jihadist attacks have increased fivefold since 2016.

An EU official close to the EPF, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said the EU would put sufficient safeguards in place, such as possibly tracing the life cycle of military equipment, although details remain secret. “If we're going to give military equipment it's inevitable that we're going to do it with quite a lot of strings attached,” he said.

Senior EU figures have [suggested](#) using the EPF to provide support for the Libyan Coast Guard, a border force that the bloc has been supporting since 2017, despite [evidence](#) of human rights violations against migrants and refugees.

The EU official said a political consensus would be required for any such action. “I would be

surprised if the EPF is used in Libya,” he added.

Yet if history is any indication, weapons and military equipment are hard to track once deployed. Frank Slijper, an arms industry researcher at the Dutch NGO Pax, argues the EPF will prescribe military responses for conflicts that do not need it, and is likely to only worsen conflicts. He said the EU would be exporting arms “to what almost by definition will be fragile post-conflict states, with significant human rights concerns.”

He added: “It increases the risk of harm to civilians, rather than bringing peace to the region.”

As with the EDF, MEPs have called for more oversight and safeguards for the peace facility. Hilde Vautmans, a Belgian MEP, said a stronger role for the parliament in overseeing the decisions of EU governments would have given the policy “more credibility”, adding: “The European people want to know what happens with their money.”

At the core of it, as the EU official explained, the reasons for the EPF are geopolitical. It will allow the EU to step into regional conflicts that would otherwise be dominated by actors such as Russia or China. Without the EPF, “we can provide training but we can’t provide any equipment,” he said.

“So when you have third countries in places like the Central African Republic that are engaging with the military and government and providing equipment that we can’t provide, without conditions that we would insist on, it’s not in the EU’s interest.”

Make peace with weapons?

In discussions around a more prominent military role for the EU, there is much mention of defending the bloc’s interests. But some people question whether the geopolitical interests of the EU and those of its citizens are the same thing.

“If you want to defend a peace project, if you want to defend peace in the world, the focus should not be in creating bigger weapons systems, but in creating more disarmament treaties,” Demirel said. “We are in a pandemic, we need this money for health projects, and not for weapons.”

Slijper put it more bluntly: “It’s clear that the European Union is drifting farther and farther away from that initial idea of a peace project and these instruments, the peace facility and the defence fund, are very clear examples.”

However, in the halls of power in Brussels, these views are a minority. “Sometimes you need military means to establish peace,” said Vautmans. “A geopolitical Europe also needs the means to be able to have an impact.”

Exactly what that impact is remains to be seen. “2021 is a startup year,” said the EU official. “The EU is changing, and this is part of that change.”

Zach Campbell
Caitlin Chandler
Chris Jones

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/19/hard-power-europes-military-drift-causes-alarm>