



The EU: from comprehensive vision to integrated action

by Thierry Tardy

The need to coordinate the various entities and policies of the EU in the field of security and development has been acknowledged since the very beginning of the Union's aspiration to play a role in world politics. With the Joint Communication on the 'EU's comprehensive approach to external conflict and crises' in 2013, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) and the Commission laid the foundations of a joined-up policy to more effectively respond to the causes and manifestations of instability.

The recent EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS) sought to move this forward by introducing the concept of an 'integrated approach to conflicts and crises' that has since become one of the Strategy's follow-up work strands (together with security and defence, resilience, the internal-external security nexus, updating existing strategies and public diplomacy).

'Integration' is not a new term in the conflict management dictionary, yet it had not really entered EU parlance until it appeared in the EUGS. What it means and implies for EU security governance, and in what ways it complements and/or differs from 'comprehensiveness', however, remains to be clarified.

Comprehensive and Integrated

The EUGS and subsequent Council conclusions define three priorities for the EU's external action: the 'security of our Union'; 'State and societal resilience to our East and South'; and 'an integrated approach to conflicts and crises'.

Under the latter, the EUGS takes stock of the complexity and multi-layered nature of foreign and security policy challenges ('from security to gender, from governance to the economy') that may 'threaten our shared vital interests'. It also refers to 'human security' that is to be fostered through the 'integrated approach' (IA).

The Strategy then offers four layers of action that further define the IA: multi-dimensional, multi-phased, multi-level, multilateral. The *multi-dimensional* approach implies the recourse to 'all available policies and instruments aimed at conflict prevention, management and resolution'. *'Multi-phased'* means that the EU must be ready to intervene at all stages of the conflict cycle. *'Multi-level'* hints at EU action at the local, national, regional and global levels. And the *multilateral* level – the only one that goes beyond an EU-only role – suggests that the EU partners with 'all those players present in a conflict and necessary for its resolution.'



As such, the IA does not seem to add anything that was not already on the EU security agenda, yet it sheds light on issues – such as the multi-phased and multi-level aspects – that were not central to the Comprehensive Approach (CA). And the very notion of ‘integration’ tends to modify the terms of the debate on how to best organise the EU’s responses to crises and instability.

Beyond the EUGS, the notion of integration in the crisis management sector had previously been widely defined and used in a UN context through the concept of ‘Integrated Mission’, as well as by the US and some EU member states, through the ‘whole-of-government’ approach.

At the UN, ‘Integrated Mission’ refers to a peacekeeping operation for which there is a shared vision among all UN actors of the strategic objective of the UN presence at country level, and that brings together all UN components (security, political, humanitarian, human rights and development) into a unique – i.e. integrated – mission structure. Integrated missions were defined in the early 2000s to reach the UN’s goals of achieving system-wide coherence and improving the effectiveness, efficiency, and impact of its peacekeeping operations.

While integration has indeed allowed for greater coherence in UN activities overall, its operationalisation has also suffered from political, as well as practical difficulties that are relevant to the EU debate. The main issue of concern relates to the politicisation (and therefore potential loss of impartiality) of the development, humanitarian, and human rights activities that can result from integration with security and political actors. The UN development and humanitarian agencies voiced their anxiety about the impact of being linked with the political component of the UN presence on the local perception of their own roles, in particular in situations where the military component of the operation had been granted a robust mandate (implying the ability to resort to force against local actors).

In practice, this called for flexibility of the process with, in some cases, the non-integration of those agencies into the UN overall mission. Integration must not rule out the possibility for some activities (in the diplomatic or military domain) to be conducted outside of the integrated structure, which in some cases can be more effective. Integration can only be suggested if it adds value to existing practices, which is another plea for flexibility.

Another potential risk of integration is the neglecting of local ownership. Integration implies an exclusive approach that then tends to ignore outside

actors, and local actors in particular. While integration is supposed to increase the overall coherence, and therefore the impact, of an international intervention, the fact that it could weaken considerations about local ownership of the stabilisation process risks making the entire integration endeavour counter-productive.

Finally, integration has proved to be an administratively cumbersome process, with resources sometimes disproportionately dedicated to the establishment and functioning of coordination mechanisms at the expense of delivering on the mandate itself.

The EU effort to define the Comprehensive Approach to an extent drew on the UN’s work on institutional coherence. The 2013 Joint Communication on the Comprehensive Approach defined it as an ambition – by drawing on the full range of EU instruments and resources, as well as on a ‘common strategic analysis and vision’ – to ‘make [EU] external action more consistent, more effective and more strategic.’ The idea was both to develop a shared analysis of challenges and to improve the coordination of the various strands of the EU response so as to maximise impact. A lot has been achieved since 2013 in the operationalisation of the CA, and inter-agency coordination at the EU level has probably never been as institutionalised and tangible as it is today, despite all the well-known structural difficulties. The CA is to be seen as a long-term objective and a process rather than as a policy to be enacted in a single stroke.

The EUGS reaffirms the relevance of the CA, but also states that its scope needs to be ‘expanded further’. What this means exactly, and to what extent the integrated approach differs from, or adds to, the CA, is yet to be fully clarified. To this end, the EEAS has started over the last few months to unpack the term and search for common ground with other EU actors – in particular the European Commission – on its interpretation. A new division, called PRISM, has also been established within the EEAS as the focal point for the implementation of the IA.

A matter of interpretation

At first glance, the CA and the IA are different words which mean roughly the same thing. Both are about building coherence in the vision and action of different EU entities and member states that are part of a broad response to instability and conflict.

New concepts may help give visibility to activities that must be constantly revisited, even if they remain by and large unchanged. But this can only

be useful if new concepts do not artificially or unnecessarily complicate policymaking.

One way in which the CA can be ‘expanded further’ under the integrated approach is by more clearly embracing the internal-external security nexus. The 2013 Joint Communication on the Comprehensive Approach referred to ‘external conflicts and crises’, and was practically confined to coordination of EU external actors (although the Joint Communication also had a section on ‘linking policies and internal and external action’). By nature, the IA is more cross-sectoral and inclusive (this is the meaning of ‘multilateral’ and ‘multi-phased’), and reaches out to Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) actors in a way that the CA does not.

This being said, the integrated approach concept can be interpreted in two different ways. First, the IA can be seen as a more ambitious, more political and longer-term approach to conflict response, whereas the CA was presented in the 2015 Action Plan (doc. 7913/15, 14 April 2015) as ‘first and foremost a general working method’, i.e. also more politically neutral. This is one meaning of ‘expanded further’ as featured in the EUGS, while an EEAS Food-for-Thought Paper on the issue states that the IA represents a ‘heightened level of ambition’. The IA is more strategic in the sense that it goes beyond the operational aspects of crisis response to better integrate the political, economic and security dimensions of the EU’s response in a more coherent sequential manner – spanning conflict prevention, crisis management, peace-building and addressing the root causes of instability. The IA is sometimes presented as being more ‘vertical’ in the sense that it aims at placing various components of the EU response under a single authority, whereas the CA was more ‘horizontal’, i.e. mobilising and synchronising a wide range of instruments.

Then comes the question of leadership or chain of command, i.e. which entity would control the integration process, or drive it. In this respect, and in reference to the UN debate, integration in an EU context may be perceived by the development and humanitarian actors as carrying a risk of association with the security/political component of a policy or operation that ‘comprehensiveness’

‘The IA is sometimes presented as being more ‘vertical’ in the sense that it aims at placing various components of the EU response under a single authority, whereas the CA was more ‘horizontal’, i.e. mobilising and synchronising a wide range of instruments.’

did not necessarily carry. Integration would be resisted as a consequence. Interestingly enough, while the Communication on the Comprehensive Approach had been a joint product of the HR/VP, the EEAS and the Commission, the IA was first conceptualised in the EUGS through a different method, before a more inclusive process started.

The other way to interpret the IA is to see it as being more operational, i.e. as a means to operationalise the comprehensive approach (‘a software that translates a comprehensive vision into integrated action’ says the EEAS Food-for-Thought Paper). To the question ‘How shall the EU implement the comprehensive approach?’, the answer would be: ‘Through operational integration’. In other words, a better coordination of EU policies and entities implies better integration of those policies and entities.

In line with the principles contained in the various CA framework and policy documents, an integrated approach to conflicts aims to create synergies at the four above-mentioned levels (multi-dimensional, multi-phased, multi-level, multilateral), i.e. improve information sharing, contribute to a shared understanding and strategic vision, reduce compartmentalisation, facilitate inter-agency delivery – all this for a greater impact.

Actionable approaches

Beyond conceptual debates, early reflections on the IA have identified a number of issues that require particular attention for its implementation. Those issues relate to the broad conflict cycle, and fall within the wide-ranging categories of ‘conflict analysis and prevention’, ‘conflict management’, and ‘post-conflict stabilisation’.

- *Conflict analysis and prevention* – An integrated approach to conflict implies first a fully-fledged capacity to analyse and prevent potential crises, and to increase the correlation between early warning and early action. This goes through the role and coordination of existing institutions in the field of conflict analysis (PRISM, EEAS Early Warning System (EWS), INTCEN, European Commission DG DEVCO, EU Delegations, CSDP operations and missions, EUISS, etc.) as well as ensuring visibility of the situations of

concern within member states, EU decision-making bodies (Foreign Affairs Council, PSC, CIVCOM, Working Groups), and other partners (UN Security Council, NATO, etc.). This also calls for an increased EU capacity in the field of early warning and conflict sensitivity (through, *inter alia*, training, information-sharing and institutional adaptation) so as to best tailor the response at the earliest possible stage.

- *Conflict management* – When a crisis or conflict breaks out with a potential impact on ‘the security of the Union’, the IA calls for a politically and operationally coherent EU response based on a shared analysis. The response is both inclusive, in the sense that it brings together and connects all EU levels (civil and military, CSDP and EU Delegations, EEAS [newly-created Crisis Response Mechanism] and Commission services, political, security, development and humanitarian aspects, etc.), and flexible, in the sense that it allows for a tailor-made approach rather than a ‘one-size-fits-all’. EU conflict management bodies also need to reach out to non-EU actors’ respective ‘crisis management cells’ (UN, NATO, OSCE, etc.) as well as to local actors as a matter of priority. Finally, short-term crisis response measures ought to be appropriately calibrated with longer-term activities that address the root causes of conflict and instability.
- *Post-conflict stabilisation* – In the post-conflict phase (insofar as a clear-cut distinction between conflict and post-conflict can be made), the IA makes sure that transition between crisis management and stabilisation fits into an inclusive and locally-owned political process. This, in turn, seeks to integrate the various political, security, and development components so as to break the cycle of violence and reduce the risks of conflict relapse. The security-development nexus and a stronger role for the European Commission and other international actors (UN, NATO, African Union, regional institutions) increases the coherence of the EU’s involvement. In the same vein, long-term commitment and local buy-in are key to the consistency and success of the EU response in post-conflict stabilisation. Ultimately, a coherent stabilisation policy contributes to conflict prevention, which attests to a degree of integration among different levels of EU action. Stabilisation as a concept and an activity has lately led to some work within the EU and some member states that need to be brought further within the EU institutions (in terms of doctrinal development and dedicated units).

Challenges and pitfalls

In essence, the integrated approach to conflicts and crises aims to consolidate the coherence and impact of the EU response to instability and to operationalise the comprehensive approach more than it changes the terms of the EU’s external action debate. One of the main challenges facing the IA is to acquire visibility and substance in its own right within the EU apparatus and beyond. The extent to which various EEAS entities, but also and most importantly the Commission and member states, will adopt the term will be key in this respect. The IA will also be confronted with the same challenges as the CA in relation to its operationalisation, the creation of incentives for integration, the buy-in from all EU actors, and the competition dynamics that may prevail among them at the expense of integration.

Furthermore, in its implementation, at least three pitfalls will need to be avoided. First, coordination through integration can be time-consuming and administratively costly. Flexibility and adaptation to changing circumstances, notably thanks to non-rigid structures and procedures, is therefore key to success.

Second, the respective identities and constraints of the various EU (and other) entities, and of how far integration can go without alienating them, must be taken into account. The mere definitional debate on the notions of early-warning, conflict prevention or long-term stabilisation is likely to reveal divergences among the various EU entities involved (EU member states, EEAS, Commission, JHA agencies), let alone local actors. Integration is a political process that cannot be seen only through technical lenses. It is also partly about policy-shaping and distribution of power within EU institutions, with all the inherent difficulties that may follow.

Finally, EU inclusiveness and integration must not develop at the expense of local needs and ownership of the crisis response or long-term stabilisation process. Increased EU coherence through integration can only maximise long-term impact if such coherence builds on – and reinforces – local buy-in.

Thierry Tardy is a Senior Analyst at the EUISS.

