

Policy Brief no.3

Revisiting Realism in the Common Security and Defence Policy

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The war in Ukraine inevitably provokes the question of revisiting Political Realism in the study of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and integrating the Realist approach in CSDP scholarship. Overall, civilian capabilities development and 'civilian CSDP' research outweighs research on EU defence and the military dimension of CSDP. Very importantly, social science CSDP-related research is almost fully embedded in the liberal-idealist concepts of Europe as a 'civilian' or 'normative power'. Drawing on the existing European Realist literature this Policy Brief makes the case for overcoming the current methodological reductionism by employing the Realist approach to the scholarship on the EU's CSDP. Methodological tools from Classical and Structural Realism could be adapted and employed in CSDP-related research for enhancing this EU policy area in an age of power.



The European Union as a “thinking organization”

The uniqueness of the European Union (EU) lies not only in its supranational and complex organizational architecture in between an international organization, a *sui generis* entity and a quasi-federal system. Another specific and differentiating feature of the EU is the ambition to develop research-based policies. The European Union is a research-oriented organization with self-reflection capabilities. This is not to say that other international actors are not reflecting on their actions; however, few are doing so in such a comprehensive and systematic way. Building upon the strong and sometimes painful European intellectual traditions of Christian theology and

secular social sciences the European Union as a thinking organization has developed self-reflection capabilities. The most clear example thereof is the Union’s comprehensive research policy which is unparalleled in other organizations such as the UN, OSCE, NATO, the World Trade Organization and others. The downside is that ‘thinking’ and ‘self-reflection’ are very time and resource-consuming and can often overshadow real action.



Is a European Realism feasible?

This Policy Brief poses the following questions:

- *What could be the added value of Realism for the study of the CSDP, EU conflict prevention and peacebuilding? How could Realism contribute in a meaningful way to research in this politically-sensitive policy area?*
- *What is the potential usability, applicability and compatibility of the two major Realist schools of thought – Classical and Structural Realism – with CSDP theory and practice?*

To great extent the research-policy interface in the area is determined by the dominant academic concepts of the European Union as a 'civilian' and 'normative' power. It is expedient to conceptualize the relevance of Realist terms such as 'power', 'nation-state', 'interest' and 'sovereignty' for CSDP. In practical terms the Realist toolbox and methods could be analysed in the context of new policy developments in the EU such as the launch of the Permanent Structured Cooperation on security and defence (PESCO), the European Defence Fund and the adoption of the Strategic Compass. These policy initiatives and the political push to defence capabilities development at the EU level – ranging from the establishment of the Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space (DEFIS) within the European Commission to ideas for developing a European Army – clearly warrant research from a Realist perspective.

Adapting Realist concepts and approaches from Classical and Structural Realism to EU studies in general and to scholarship on the CSDP in particular is certainly a challenging task. A potential conceptually viable solution would be the development of a European Realism which transcends the Member States (nation-states) and goes to the supra-national level of the European Union. Typical examples in this respect would be some of the most prominent power actors on the international arena such as the US and Russia which could not be considered nation-states in the strict sense as they are *de facto* and *de jure* multinational (supra-national) federations. Therefore, the focus of Classical Realism on nation-states is not fully rigorous in scientific terms and could be modified to meet the needs of CSDP-related research. In this train of thought unpacking high-level concepts such as 'European power', 'European interests', 'European sovereignty' and 'European federalism' is credible from a Realist perspective. Very importantly, the link between the EU and 'hard power' should be analysed in Realist terms with due attention and sensitivity to public perceptions.



The potential of the Realist approach for the study of the CSDP: the case of the 'European Armed Forces'

The Realist approach seems very suitable for analysing the still underdeveloped concept of European Armed Forces. The understanding of the international system as a system of power relations is shaped by Classical Realism as set out by Morgenthau and Structural Realism (Neo-Realism) as elaborated by Waltz.¹ The Realist approach has been underestimated in scholarship on the EU as a global actor but, as argued by Rynning Realist thought can contribute to the study of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).² In Rynning's view Classical Realism is ultimately a more persuasive framework for understanding the CSDP.³ It integrates objective and subjective factors in its assessment, arguing that the distribution of power can only be understood with reference to power's purpose.

From a Classical Realist perspective, the critique of EU defence capabilities development could go along two lines. First, the conceptual foundations of EU defence could be questioned. Traditionally the EU is conceptualized as a 'civilian power' which does not get involved in 'power politics'.⁴ The concept of the EU as a 'civilian power' has great implications on the developments in the area of CSDP and on the formation and implementation of the EU's peacebuilding missions and operations. EU defence capabilities have been underrated throughout the years and this reflects fears of 'militarization' of the Union which could be traced back to the traumatic experience of World War II. The notion of the EU as a 'civilian power' is closely tied with the concept of liberal peacebuilding which has been dominant in Europe for many years.

This conceptual argument to great extent has lost its relevance and validity in the current volatile geopolitical environment. The violent military conflicts and, most notably the war in Ukraine warrant the involvement of the EU in traditional 'power politics' and 'Realpolitik'. This new Realist approach laid down in the EU's Global Strategy (adopted in 2016) has been

called by Biscop 'Realpolitik with European characteristics'.⁵ The EU Global Strategy not only presents for the first time ever in an EU document the EU's vital interests – which is in line with Classical Realism - but also puts special emphasis on the need for 'hard power', i.e. EU defence capabilities. The Permanent Structured Cooperation in security and defence (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund which were launched in 2017 are also important steps for implementing the Realist approach to the EU's CSDP. This process has been described by Haroche as the rise of the European Commission (and of the EU more generally) as a defence actor.⁶ This trend was sustained by the newly elected European Commission in 2018 as evidenced in the Opening statement of the new President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen.⁷ In this statement the President of the Commission clearly expressed commitment to the European Defence Union and described the new Commission as a 'geopolitical European Commission'. The shifting geopolitical environment and the war in Ukraine have strongly shaped the latest EU strategic document, the Strategic Compass which is more defence-oriented and sets out a common strategic vision for EU security and defence policy over the next 5-10 years.⁸ The civilian nature of the EU is no longer a 'sacred cow' and this opens academic space for Realism.

The concept of European Armed Forces could also be attacked from the perspective of International organizations theory as historically armies are inherent to the nation-building process. Throughout history armies have been conceived either by nation-states or by empires. Therefore, the ability of the EU as an international organization to form an army of its own could be contested in theoretical and historical terms. It should be noted that in academic literature the nature of the EU as an international actor is widely contested. There are three major competing theoretical explanations of the EU as an international organization, as a federal system or as a *sui generis* entity. Unlike other policy areas

the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy is prevalingly intergovernmental in character with clear predominance of EU Member States interests.⁹ CSDP is an intergovernmental instrument largely governed by consensus, so the interests of EU Member States are a critical component of the policy process.¹⁰ In this area the EU operates as an international organization rather than as a federation or a *sui generis* entity. Therefore, it is very important to develop a viable model for defining the European interests in the defence domain drawing upon EU Member States national interests. From a Realist perspective the term 'European interest' is scientifically credible as some of the most prominent power actors on the international arena such as the US and Russia could not be considered nation-states in the strict sense as they are de facto and de jure multinational (supra-national) federations. In this train of thought research on high-level concepts such as 'European power', 'European interests', 'European sovereignty' and 'European federalism' is fully credible. A promising research objective would

be to define a new form of 'European federalism' which could overcome the partisan liberal interpretation and further elaborate federalism as a policy framework for developing a strong Europe of nations. The concept of European Armed Forces would naturally fit in such a novel European federalist policy framework and the Realist approach could be helpful in substantiating the concept itself. In this context, Realism would not only play an explanatory role but also an ideological one. As noted by Jørgensen and Jorgensen some of the Realists in Europe actually practice ideology.¹¹



Conclusions

The CDE4Peace project addresses the problem of methodological diversity in the study of EU conflict prevention and peacebuilding and the Common Security and Defence Policy. The main focus has been overcoming the current methodological reductionism by introducing the Concept development and experimentation (CD&E) methodology which has been very successful in NATO policy-making. As shown

in this Policy Brief, the Realist approach coming from International relations theory can also play an important role for revitalising scholarship on the CSDP. A possible future research avenue is linking CD&E with Realism in order to achieve a more elaborate understanding of the dynamics of the CSDP and EU conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

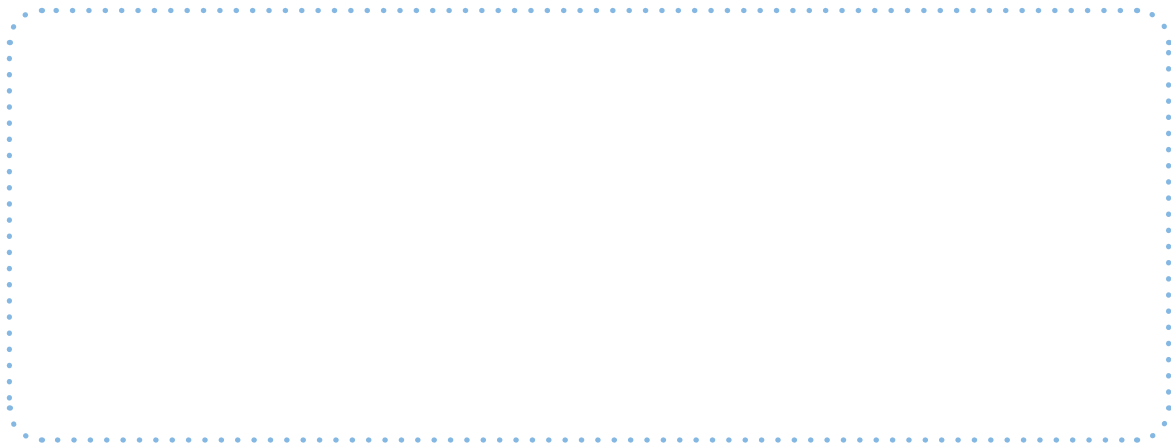
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About CDE4Peace

CDE4Peace is a Marie Curie project funded under the EU's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation programme (GA no. 882055). The project's principal research objective is to explore the potential of Concept Development and Experimentation for enhancing the EU's conflict prevention and peace-building policy. The project's hypothesis is that Concept Development and Experimentation could serve as a tool for politically independent, unbiased

and safe experimentation of novel concepts and approaches in the field of EU conflict prevention and peace-building. The project's research and innovation objectives are closely related to the current developments in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) which forms the political framework of EU conflict prevention and peace-building. The project is hosted by the Vienna-based research and innovation company SYNYO GmbH.



CDE4Peace 
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- ⁷ Opening statement by Ursula von der Leyen, Candidate for President of the European Commission in the European Parliament, July 16, 2018.
- ⁸ *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* (Council of the EU, Brussels, 21 March 2022).
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