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FUTURE-PROOFING CIVILIAN CSDP IN A CHALLENGING STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT: SEVEN QUESTIONS FOR DEBATE

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SUMMARY

● Despite repeated efforts, much-needed improvements to increase the strategic impact of the European Union's (EU) Civilian Common Security and Defence Policy (civilian CSDP) have failed to materialize. Simultaneously, the formulation of strategic guidance in Brussels has stalled. This state of affairs risks civilian CSDP's credibility and legitimacy in addressing the EU's foreign policy priorities and security challenges.

Against this backdrop, this research policy paper provides decision makers with seven questions for discussion. These questions touch upon civilian CSDP's future as a crisis management tool, its functional and geographical prioritization, the breadth of mission mandates, host country relations and other aspects that have remained largely unresolved following two civilian CSDP compacts. To maintain civilian CSDP's strategic relevance and prepare the instrument for the future, member states need to agree on answers to these questions.

To effectively tackle the proposed agenda, future debate needs to take place at a politico-strategic level and avoid becoming fragmented across different policy forums. In addition, discussions surrounding the instrument's development should expand beyond technicalities and consider it as one of many foreign policy tools available to the EU in its deteriorated security environment and under the current geopolitical circumstances.

I. Introduction

Experts and practitioners frequently voice a general sense of unease when asked about the state of the Civilian Common Security and Defence Policy (civilian CSDP).[1] There have been multiple attempts to reform the tool to increase mission impact and strategic relevance, most prominently through two civilian CSDP compacts.[2] Much-needed improvements have failed to materialize, however, and a shared strategic direction remains elusive. The reasons for this include a continuing lack of resources, diverging priorities and threat perceptions, the general focus in Brussels on defence issues and military aid, and insufficient member state commitment.[3] These issues persist at a time of formidable challenges in the European Union's (EU) strategic environment, with Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine being only the most recent of more than a decade of crises in the EU's neighbourhoods. These challenges make the ability of the EU to be a credible international partner and actor in broader European security more important than ever. However, the debate on civilian CSDP in Brussels has stalled, as has the formulation of strategic guidance by member states as the instrument's key stakeholders. Consequently, civilian CSDP risks losing its credibility and legitimacy as an effective tool for addressing the EU's external challenges.

Against this backdrop, this research policy paper seeks to provide decision makers with an agenda for debate. It proposes that if civilian CSDP is to maintain its relevance in a challenging strategic environment, member states

[1] The findings in this paper are supported by 30 semi-structured interviews with current and former European Union and member state officials and with local practitioners that took place under conditions of anonymity in July, August and September 2025.

[2] Council of the European Union, 'Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on the establishment of a Civilian CSDP Compact', 9588/23, 22 May 2023; and Council of the European Union, 'Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on the establishment of a Civilian CSDP Compact', 14305/18, 19 Nov. 2018.

[3] Smit, T., 'Towards a more strategic civilian CSDP: Strengthening EU civilian crisis management in a new era of geopolitics and risk', Research Policy Paper, SIPRI, Nov. 2024, pp. 10, 15; Tammikko, T. and Ruohomäki, J., 'The future of EU crisis management: Finding a niche', FIIA Briefing Paper, May 2019, pp. 3–4; and Zandee, D. and de Baedts, R., 'European defence: The future of EU missions', Clingendael Policy Brief, May 2024, p. 3.

must agree on answers to seven questions that remain largely unresolved by the first and second compacts. These questions are located at different levels of abstraction, ranging from the philosophical to the practical. Answers at all these levels are important and have concrete implications for future-proofing civilian CSDP missions.

II. Recalibrating the tool: What kinds of crises can civilian CSDP missions address?

Knowing what constitutes a manageable crisis is crucial to the debate on the future of civilian CSDP. A lack of clarity regarding the kinds of crises the tool is intended to address limits understanding of its suitability and its ability to generate meaningful impact. Changes in Europe's security environment and the broadening of the scope of civilian CSDP since the first compact have heightened the risk of a mismatch between the instrument, the challenges for which it was initially designed and the crisis situations it now targets.[4] This raises questions about its efficacy as a crisis management tool.

Civilian CSDP was created at a time when crises were often perceived as resolvable and temporary. The 2000 Feira Principles on Civilian CSDP reflect this by emphasizing the transition from crisis and the (re)establishment of capacities and institutions.[5] This focus corresponds with the common understanding of a crisis as a discrete event that requires an urgent response.[6] However, many of the crises the EU currently faces are set to persist far into the future. Prominent among these are the 'permacrisis' of irregular migration at the EU's southern border, long-term foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[7]

At the same time as the EU's challenges have become more entrenched, missions have been scaled back over the past decade and geared to a modular and scalable approach, a notable exception being the EU Advisory Mission in Ukraine.[8] This shift was attributed by many interviewees to declining member state commitment or interest and limited capacities.[9] However, the shift in mission size and make-up has also been characterized as a return to genuine crisis management that understands crises and thus missions as time-limited.[10] The provision of time-limited assistance is juxtaposed with long-term democracy- and state-building missions, such as EULEX Kosovo which is considered by experts and the local population to have long

[4] Council of the European Union, 9588/23 (note 2); and Council of the European Union, 14305/18 (note 2).

[5] European Council, 'Presidency conclusions, Santa Maria Da Feira European Council', Santa Maria Da Feira, 19–20 June 2000.

[6] Boin, A. et al., 'Understanding and acting upon a creeping crisis', eds. A. Boin, M. Ekengren and M. Rhinard, *Understanding the Creeping Crisis,* 1st edn (Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, Ill., 2021), p. 3.

[7] Martini, L. S. and Megirisi, T., 'Road to nowhere: Why Europe's border externalization is a dead end', ECFR Policy Brief, Dec. 2023; and European External Action Service (EEAS), *3rd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats: Exposing the Architecture of FIMI Operations*, Mar. 2025.

[8] Council of the European Union, 9588/23 (note 2), p. 5; and Savoranta, V. and Karjalainen, T., 'The EU's strategic approach to CSDP interventions: Building a tenet from praxis', FIIA Analysis, Oct. 2021, pp. 7–15.

[9] Tammikko and Ruohomäki (note 3), pp. 4–7; and Interviews with the author (note 1).

[10] Interviews with the author (note 1).

passed its crisis management stage.[11] However, given the complex nature of many of the situations that civilian CSDP seeks to address, questions arise regarding the ability of small-scale missions to generate a sustained impact. Moreover, the scale of missions does not change the emphasis in civilian CSDP on monitoring, providing strategic advice and capacity-building, which have been criticized for being peripheral to crisis management.[12] The question therefore arises whether civilian CSDP missions are the right tool for addressing complex challenges, given their limitations in scale and activities. The blurred line between protracted crisis and systemic problems also calls into question whether civilian missions targeted in this way can still be categorized as crisis management.

Sub-questions member states need to answer:

- How can the mismatch between the instrument, the challenges for which it was initially designed and the crisis situations it currently targets be reconciled?
- Should civilian CSDP missions be deployed to address protracted crises? If so, how can small-scale missions be effective in the context of a protracted crisis and related structural challenges?
- How do the answers provided to these questions link to questions about resources and staffing?

III. Charting the course: What are the priorities for civilian CSDP?

Establishing which of the ongoing thirteen civilian CSDP missions matter most is crucial for the effective deployment of the instrument (for an overview, see table 1). A clear sense of priorities is equally crucial when considering opening new missions. Without prioritization, scarce resources and capabilities are spread thin by a plethora of competing interests, minimizing the overall impact of the instrument. Despite the unifying effect of the war in Ukraine on EU member states' threat perceptions, differing key concerns and the continuing increase in the number of civilian CSDP missions complicate consensus-building when it comes to defining priorities for the instrument.

Geographical prioritization: 360 degrees or a pivot to the East?

As part of this debate, geographical prioritization has become a central line of disagreement, triggered by the increased attention to the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood, deteriorating relations with host countries in sub-Saharan Africa and the need to conserve resources.[13]

[11] Zupancic, R. et al., 'The European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo: An effective conflict prevention and peace-building mission?', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 20, no. 6 (2017), pp. 599–617.

[12] Savoranta and Karjalainen (note 8), p. 7.

[13] Smit (note 3), p. 3; Euractiv, 'Niger ends security and defence partnerships with the EU', AFP, 5 Dec. 2023; and Reuters, 'EU to close Mali military training mission', 8 May 2024.

Table 1. Active EU civilian CSDP missions as of 31 October 2025, by region

Africa	Europe	Middle East
EU Advisory Mission in the CAR (EUAM RCA, launched 2020)	EU Advisory Mission in Ukraine (EUAM Ukraine, launched 2014)	EU Advisory Mission in Iraq (EUAM Iraq, launched 2017)
EU Border Assistance Mission in Libya (EUBAM Libya, launched 2013)	EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA, launched 2023)	EU Border Assistance Mission at the Rafah Crossing Point (EUBAM Rafah, launched 2005)
EU Capacity Building Mission in Mali (EUCAP Sahel Mali, launched 2015	EU Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX Kosovo, launched 2008)	EU Policy and Rule of Law Mission for the Palestinian Territories (EUPOL COPPS, launched 2006)
EU Capacity Building Mission in Somalia (EUCAP Somalia, launched 2012)	EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM Georgia, launched 2008)	
EU Security and Defence Initiative in the Gulf of Guinea (EUSDI Gulf of Guinea, launched 2023)	EU Partnership Mission in Moldova (EUPM Moldova, launched 2023)	

CAR = Central African Republic; CSDP = Common Security and Defence Policy; EU = European Union.

Source: SIPRI Multilateral Peace Operations Database, accessed 31 Oct. 2025.

One prominent position, frequently referred to as the 360° approach, asserts that missions should not be geographically limited, but instead oriented towards all areas where the EU's security interests are at stake.[14] In a global security environment often characterized by hybrid and irregular threats, imposing strict geographical zones of interest is seen as short-sighted and unnecessarily self-limiting. Proponents of the 360° approach are mostly found among southern member states with close historical ties and geographic proximity to the Middle East, North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. They argue that a permanent pivot away from the Southern Neighbourhood would be detrimental to the EU's long-term interests concerning migration and transnational crime. It would also leave the region open to strategic competitors and adversaries. In particular, dynamics similar to the security partnership between the Malian military junta and the Wagner Group, a Russian private military company, that preceded the closure of the EU's CSDP military training mission in Mali in 2024 have raised concerns.[15]

In contrast to the 360° approach, some stakeholders favour a more concerted pivot to the East.[16] They advocate the closure of missions, particularly in Africa and the Middle East, that are seen as generating little or no impact for host governments. Moreover, in some cases, missions were considered by interviewees to be of real interest only to one or two EU member states with special ties to the host country.[17] Proponents of the pivot to the East invoke the overstretched capacities of civilian CSDP, and argue that valuable resources and personnel need to be redirected to address security threats in the East, which is considered the EU's high-priority neighbourhood.

While these are the prominent geographical faultlines within the CSDP debate, some consider both regional and global prioritization somewhat mis-

[14] Interviews with the author (note 1).

[15] Pfeifer Cruz, C., 'Developments and trends in Multilateral Peace Operations, 2024', *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, May 2025, p. 4; and European External Action Service (EEAS), *Holistic Strategic Review of EUTM Mali and EUCAP Sahel Mali 2022*, EEAS, May 2022, pp. 4, 6.

[16] Interviews with the author (note 1).

[17] Interviews with the author (note 1).

guided, arguing instead for the prioritization of specific countries where the most impact can be achieved.

Functional prioritization: impact or showing presence?

Another facet of the prioritization debate concerns the balance between the operational functions of civilian CSDP missions and their role as a political tool. Civilian CSDP was initially conceived as a technical crisis management tool.[18] However, its intergovernmental institutional background has meant that the deployment of civilian CSDP missions has become a prominent tool for member states to pursue their individual foreign policy goals and to signal political commitment.[19] Advocates of the importance of civilian CSDP as a political tool highlight that it is a strong indicator of EU interest that provides it with entry points to certain conflict and crisis contexts.[20] The effort to strengthen EUBAM Rafah and EUPOL COPPS to aid stabilization and peace processes in Gaza are cited as a case in point.[21] The potentially harmful political signal sent by mission closure was also emphasized. It was noted that the EU's image as a reliable partner could be harmed if it is perceived as giving up on crisis management, and by extension on its partners.

Those who favour a more operational focus maintain that pursuing political goals without generating tangible results is insufficient to justify maintaining mission structures in host countries.[22] They criticize the assumption that the mere presence of seconded experts and EU staff is enough to generate strategically relevant impact for the EU. This criticism extends to missions that, despite their limited impact, are maintained as an asset in the EU's geo-strategic competition with Russia and China, such as EUBAM Libya or the missions in the Sahel. A growing concern on this side of the debate is that with its emphasis on political engagement over impact, civilian CSDP has delegitimized itself and harmed the EU's image among various stakeholders.

Sub-questions member states need to answer:

- Should high-impact missions in a smaller number of locations be prioritized; or should missions be prioritized that maintain a broader presence globally?
- Should the political impact or the operational impact of missions be prioritized?
- How is the prioritization of missions linked to questions about resources and staffing?

[18] Gourlay, C., 'Civilian CSDP: A tool for state-building?', eds. S. Biscop and R. Whitman, *The Routledge Handbook of European Security*, 1st edn (Routledge: London, 2012), pp. 91–104.

[19] Savoranta and Karjalainen (note 8), pp. 13–14.

[20] Interviews with the author (note 1).

[21] European Council, 'EU position on the situation in the Middle East', European Council Conclusions, 23 Oct. 2025.

[22] Interviews with the author (note 1).

IV. Enabling success: How can productive engagement with host countries be assured?

Facilitating and maintaining productive engagement with host countries is central to ensuring that the strategic objectives of member states in deploying civilian missions can be fulfilled. Local buy-in and ownership are accepted as standard principles in international peace-building missions and recognized in the *Handbook on CSDP*.[23] However, ensuring host country buy-in and local ownership poses a continuous challenge for civilian CSDP, and many of its past and present shortcomings have been attributed to their absence.[24] In order to ensure productive engagement with host countries, two separate questions stand out in the broader debate: Who should the EU engage with and how should missions engage with host countries during deployment?

Which host countries should the instrument engage with?

Local buy-in was frequently reported by practitioners and EU officials to be positively affected by the degree to which the EU and the host country converge in terms of shared overarching objectives.[25] One example is EUPM Moldova, where Moldova's cooperation with the mission has been heightened by the shared objective of countering FIMI and election interference from Russia, and the country's aim to join the EU. However, to what extent shared objectives and even values are necessary for productive engagement is open to question.

Some argue that a high level of congruence should set the standard for most missions to ensure steady levels of local buy-in.[26] However, EUPM Moldova's mandate, which is focused on preventing election interference and countering misinformation, requires intensive and in-depth cooperation with local counterparts to tailor activities to specific needs and gaps.[27] A similarly deep alignment may not be feasible or necessary in all missions. Others argue that adopting a more transactional approach that is less focused on broad alignment of objectives and values in favour of more selective, effectiveness-oriented tasks would also allow for productive engagement. However, as this approach tends to prioritize short-term, ad hoc arrangements, it limits the potential for sustainable change.[28]

Another factor that might require consideration before deployment is the level of ambition of both the EU and the host country. Even where general objectives are aligned, a recognition of a mismatch in the expected scope and nature of the mission between the two parties could call into question

[23] Federal Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Austria, *Handbook on CSDP: The Common Security and Defence Policy of the European Union*, vol. 1, 4th edn (2021), p. 96; and Ejdus, F., '"Here is your mission, now own it!" The rhetoric and practice of local ownership in EU interventions', *European Security*, vol. 26 no. 4 (2017), pp. 461–84.

[24] EEAS (note 15); and Jayasundara-Smits, S., 'From revolution to reform and back: EU security sector reform in Ukraine', *European Security*, vol. 27, no. 4 (2018), pp. 453–68.

[25] Interviews with the author (note 1).

[26] Interviews with the author (note 1).

[27] Council Decision (CFSP) 2023/855 of 24 April 2023 on a European Union Partnership Mission in Moldova (EUPM Moldova), *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 110/30, 25 Apr. 2023.

[28] Hellmüller, S. and Salaymeh, B., 'Transactional peacemaking: Warmakers as peacemakers in the political marketplace of peace processes', *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2025), pp. 312–42.

whether a civilian CSDP mission is the right tool. Particularly if there is a high level of ambition in the host country, a civilian mission is likely to lack the resources, capabilities and member state commitment to match expectations. Returning to the example of EUPM Moldova, the initial expectations of the Moldovan authorities were geared towards the establishment of a larger mission with executive powers, instead of its current mandate as a small-scale and flexible strategic advisory mission.[29] While EUPM Moldova stands out positively among missions, more embedded and hands-on help with fighting misinformation and cyber threats remains a core need of the Moldovan government.

How to engage with host countries during deployment?

Productive engagement with host countries is affected to a substantial degree by how practical cooperation with the mission unfolds in the field.[30] This has prompted reflection on the factors that hinder productive engagement once missions have been established. From past experience, practitioners and officials highlighted insufficient local language, intercultural and social skills, as well as short secondment periods as obstacles to maintaining productive engagement.[31] In particular, these were identified as complicating communication and the development of long-term trust with host country counterparts. From the perspective of local partners, the duration of a secondment period was just long enough to familiarize themselves with mission staff and to build a good working relationship. While there is an argument to be made that secondments require time limitations to prevent mission drift, short-termism increases the risk of inefficiencies and a loss of know-how that prevent the generation of strategically relevant impact.[32]

Sub-questions member states need to answer:

- What requirements in terms of shared objectives, values and ambitions should be defined as prerequisites for establishing a mission in any given country, and for what types of tasks?
- When and how should changes in host country buy-in or EU-host country relations affect decisions about mandates and mission closure?
- How can effective working relations and continuity of trust with local counterparts be ensured?

V. Building consensus: Is civilian CSDP effective?

A major issue is the lack of agreement on which missions have been effective or impactful in a strategically relevant way. This inability to find a common

[29] Interviews with the author (note 1).

[30] Rieker, P. and Blockmans, S., 'Plugging the capability-expectations gap: Towards effective, comprehensive and conflict-sensitive EU crisis response?', *European Security*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2019), pp. 1–21.

[31] Interviews with the author (note 1).

[32] Friesendorf, C. et al., 'Implementing CSDP missions: The daily travails of police experts', *European Security*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2024), pp. 63–81; and Interviews with the author (note 1).

basis for understanding the instrument limits the EU's ability to focus its priorities and steer it into the future. A major issue in this context concerns the divergent interpretations of mission reviews and assessments, as well as doubts about their veracity and methodology.[33] Primary among the assessment mechanisms are the strategic reviews conducted by the Division for Strategic Planning for Crisis Management (PCM.3) at the European External Action Service (EEAS), which are carried out at the halfway point and before the end of every mission mandate period.[34] PCM.3's strategic reviews have been frequently criticized for their lack of transparency regarding their indicators, their lack of systematic analysis and the recurrent problem of 'dressing up' reports in order to continue deployment.[35] A commitment has been made in the 2023 Civilian CSDP Compact that PCM.3 will develop a methodology for its strategic reviews.[36]

Moreover, on the initiative of a group of member states, a new assessment mechanism in the form of impact evaluations conducted by the Division for an Integrated Approach for Peace and Security (PCM.1) was introduced in the new compact as a more independent form of review.[37] At the time of writing, an impact evaluation has been completed for EULEX Kosovo and an assessment of EUAM Iraq is expected to be finalized in early 2026.[38] However, the findings of the pilot study on EULEX Kosovo have been disputed and criticized by some member states and the Civilian Operations Headquarters as biased and based on foregone conclusions.[39] As access to impact evaluations and most strategic reviews is restricted, additional information regarding the specific points of contention is not available. In addition to the lack of coordination between the different assessment mechanisms, competing conceptual understandings of key concepts such as effectiveness, impact assessment and evaluation among the EEAS bodies and member states have complicated systemized knowledge management in the past.[40] While it is inevitable that different actors will interpret missions and their successes differently, the continued lack of trust in and understanding of assessment mechanisms needs to be addressed to generate a shared understanding of the impact of civilian CSDP.

Sub-questions member states need to answer:

- How can the different assessment and review mechanisms be harmonized to ensure compatibility with regard to agreement on and the measurement of standards of effectiveness?

[33] Interviews with the author (note 1).

[34] European External Action Service (EEAS), 'Peace, Partnerships and Crisis Management Directorate, PCM', 12 Dec. 2023.

[35] Faleg, G. et al. (eds), *The New Civilian CSDP Compact: Food for Impact* (EU Institute for Security Studies: Paris, 2023), p. 66; and Interviews with the author (note 1).

[36] Council of the European Union, 9588/23 (note 2), p. 15; and Interviews with the author (note 1).

[37] Council of the European Union, 9588/23 (note 2), p. 21; EEAS (note 34); and Interviews with the author (note 1).

[38] Council of the European Union, 'European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX Kosovo) Impact Evaluation', ST 8023 2025 INIT, 13. Feb. 2025; and Interviews with the author (note 1).

[39] Interviews with the author (note 1).

[40] Faleg et al. (note 35), p. 62.

- How can agreement on and trust in mission review and assessment mechanisms be enhanced?
- How can civilian CSDP be made more transparent and accessible to external oversight without infringing on member states' prerogatives?

VI. The right balance: How broad should mandates be and how often should they be revised?

Breadth of mandate is a key factor in the success of missions and their ability to generate strategically relevant impact, as this determines the mission's range and flexibility of action and offers a benchmark for later evaluations. In recent years, a consensus has coalesced around making mission mandates narrower and more realistic, as broader mandates have been criticized for leaving mission end-states vague, far exceeding available resources and complicating the transition to other EU instruments, while also being an obstacle to an effective division of labour between different EU actors.[41] Better targeted mission mandates are a goal of the 2023 compact.[42] However, there are also proponents of broader mandates, due to the flexibility they provide to quickly adjust priorities, adapt to new threats and respond to rapid changes in the field.[43] From this perspective, the broadness of the mandate can and should be offset by the operational plan and the mission implementation plan.

Broad mission mandates have been criticized not only for their lack of actionable goals and objectives, but also with regard to the challenges and issues they address. Mandates have undergone consistent broadening since the inception of civilian CSDP.[44] Following the refugee crisis and the resulting widespread securitization of migration, missions began to overlap with those of Justice and Home Affairs actors, as some mandates began to include border management to address migration from Europe's Southern Neighbourhood.[45] Moreover, the first compact highlighted a number of areas—such as irregular migration, the protection of cultural heritage, border management and maritime security, violent extremism, and cyber and hybrid threats—where civilian CSDP missions could assist the wider European response.[46] This has increased the risk of duplication and put additional pressure on civilian CSDP's staff shortages, as the instrument must compete with other EU actors for the same experts and resources.[47] Most saliently, it has been argued that moving into areas where other actors are already active

[41] Van der Lijn, J. et al., *Assessing the Effectiveness of European Union Civilian CSDP Missions Involved in Security Sector Reform: The Cases of Afghanistan, Mali and Niger* (SIPRI: Stockholm, 2024), pp. 22, 63; and Interviews with the author (note 1).

[42] Council of the European Union, 9588/23 (note 2), p. 7.

[43] Interviews with the author (note 1).

[44] Bergmann, J. and Müller, P., 'Spillover dynamics and inter-institutional interactions between CSDP and AFSJ: Moving towards a more joined-up EU external migration policy?', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 49, no. 12 (2023), pp. 3005–23.

[45] Bergmann and Müller (note 44), p. 3010.

[46] Council of the European Union, 14305/18 (note 2), p. 4.

[47] Pietz, T., 'The Civilian CSDP Compact: Strengthening or repurposing EU civilian crisis management?', IAI Commentaries, Oct. 2018.

detracts from efficient, problem-oriented approaches to the EU's external challenges.[48]

The frequent broadening of mandates highlights the related question of how often mission mandates should be changed. While adjustments are certainly necessary to ensure that missions can grow and adapt to new challenges, frequent mandate changes that expand objectives and tasks reduce the ability to assess missions, as benchmarks keep shifting. This in turn makes it harder to pursue objectives in a consistent manner and can weaken the strategic focus of missions, with implications for their overall strategic relevance.

Sub-questions member states need to answer:

- How should the flexibility, adaptability and the scope of mission mandates be weighed against their actionability?
- How can mandate revisions be instituted without affecting strategic consistency and the ability to evaluate mission performance?
- How can the further thematic broadening of mandates be avoided or limited?

VII. Building capacity: How can staff shortages be resolved?

If civilian CSDP is to increase its strategic relevance, tackling its quantitative and qualitative staffing problems will be of paramount importance. Without adequate levels of relevant experts and practitioners, executing effective crisis management that meets member state and host country expectations will be an uphill battle even where precise mandates and efficient bureaucratic structures are in place. Moreover, chronic understaffing paired with short-term deployment have knock-on effects on relations with host country institutions, institutional memory and missions' working environments, which in turn reduce the attractiveness of mission secondment.[49]

Civilian CSDP missions are staffed by secondees and contracted personnel. Seconded experts fill most of the operational roles that require the specific expertise and know-how necessary for mandate fulfilment. The proportion of secondees varies greatly between missions and regions, fluctuating between 26 per cent in Africa and the Middle East to 74 per cent in Europe.[50] The second compact sets a target for at least 70 per cent of international staff to be seconded experts, a target from which staffing patterns are moving away.[51]

The staffing issue has emerged as an intractable problem in policy discussions, as increases in the number of expert staff require increased political buy-in among seconding member states. Political buy-in is unlikely to increase, however, unless staff increases generate more significant and widespread impact.[52] Since increased political buy-in is unlikely to materialize on

[48] Bergmann and Müller (note 44), p. 3008.
[49] Savoranta and Karjalainen (note 8), p. 10; and Interviews with the author (note 1).
[50] Smit (note 3), p. 8.
[51] Council of the European Union, 9588/23 (note 2); and Faleg et al. (note 35), p. 40.
[52] Interviews with the author (note 1).

its own, and civilian CSDP is at a comparative disadvantage when it comes to attracting seconded experts, the need to expand recruitment within EU member states has been emphasized. For example, countries such as Finland and the Netherlands already allow interested personnel and experts from the public, private and NGO sectors to apply.[53] In tandem with widening the pool of experts who can be seconded, improving the working conditions of mission staff has been raised as an urgent need to address the human resource issues of civilian CSDP.[54]

Although much lauded as a solution to the staff shortage problem, evidence of the superiority of a modular and scalable approach, such as the deployment of a hybrid rapid response team to EUPM Moldova to assist local mission personnel, requires further substantiation. There are concerns that the approach might justify the understaffing of missions, which would increase the burden on seconded experts while distracting them from their main tasks.

In addition, improvements are required and obstacles remain with regard to harmonizing and integrating secondments into domestic career paths, as secondment can detract from career advancement at home.

Sub-questions member states need to answer:

- What alternative methods of force generation are feasible if staffing missions continues to be a challenge?
- How can working conditions for seconded staff be improved?
- How can secondments be better incorporated into national career paths?
- How can seconding practices be better harmonized between member states?

VIII. Learning both ways: How can the knowledge acquired in missions be transferred back to member states?

Gaining practical experience, particularly in states that are combating new and emerging threats, has been cited as a unique valued added of civilian CSDP. Specifically, secondees can gain first-hand information on and experience of developing FIMI and hybrid threat patterns while also advancing their professional skills. However, establishing systematic, institutionalized processes for knowledge management has been a recurring problem.[55] In addition, knowledge sharing by the mission or the EEAS focused on the practical know-how gained during secondment remains ad hoc. While debriefings by member states influence foreign policy and pre-deployment training in various countries, debriefings of returning staff do not generally focus on insights and skills that are applicable to similar issues in the domestic

[53] European Centre of Excellence for Civilian Crisis Management, 'EU Civilian Crisis Management: CoE Members' Capability Map', accessed 10. Dec. 2025.
[54] Interviews with the author (note 1).
[55] Faleg et al. (note 35), pp. 65–70.

context.[56] In particular, when considering the goal of instituting and making use of more specialized teams, further analysis is required to assess whether short-term periods of activity provide added value. It should be noted that the lack of institutionalized processes in the context of secondees does not mean that exchanges and transfers of know-how and experience are not taking place at the intergovernmental level. In the case of Moldova, for example, member states have had direct exchange and contact on matters of internal security, such as combating election interference, through the EU support hub for internal security and border management.[57]

Sub-questions member states need to answer:

- To what extent and for what types of missions does the transfer of know-how provide added value for member states?
- What institutionalized processes should be established for knowledge transfer?

IX. Conclusions: Seeing the bigger picture is a prerequisite for a strategic civilian CSDP

In Brussels and member state capitals, a more robust debate on the strategic relevance of civilian CSDP is long overdue. By asking seven key questions, this research policy paper provides stakeholders with an agenda for this crucial debate. It is important to note that these questions cannot be discussed separately from one another, as the answers to one directly influence how to think about the others. For instance, how broad mandates should ideally be depends on what form of prioritization is advanced and how the tool's ability to address certain crises is understood. In addition, given the intertwined nature of the questions, there is no self-evident order in which they should be addressed. Rather, the most useful sequencing when answering these questions will be contingent on decision makers' judgement and prevailing political constraints.

Nonetheless, the question of how civilian CSDP should prioritize offers a helpful point of departure for future discussions, as it underlies and intersects with most of the questions raised in this paper. To illustrate, if member states prioritize signalling political commitment over generating operational impact, a greater geographical spread of civilian CSDP missions becomes feasible due to the lighter resource demands such missions entail. At the same time, the subjective element in assessments of political impact complicates reaching a shared consensus on a mission's strategic value. Conversely, a focus on operational impact is likely to increase the need for expert staff, adequate resources and EU-host country alignment on shared values and objectives.

From the geographical prioritization perspective, focusing on operational impact complicates the feasibility of a 360° approach, as only a limited

[56] Caparini, M. and Osland, K. M., *Knowledge Management and Police Peacekeepers: Experiences and Recommendations*, NUPI Report, no. 6 (2017).

[57] EU4Digital, 'EU Security Hub: Combat information manipulation and foreign interference', 10 Oct. 2024.

number of potential host countries offer the level of value and goal alignment required for close cooperation. Moreover, a civilian CSDP that doubles down on the 360° approach would need to effectively plan for and generate capabilities across a wider range of tasks and contexts, thereby increasing the challenge of achieving sustainable impact. This elevates the importance of defining what types of crises civilian CSDP can or should address, alongside the need for a commonly accepted knowledge base and a serious commitment to capability development.

The intertwined questions cannot be answered in a meaningful way at the technical level. To effectively tackle the agenda proposed in this paper, the debate on the strategic relevance of civilian CSDP must take place at the politico-strategic level. This will be impossible in the absence of more engaged capitals and commonly accepted review and assessment mechanisms. In addition, decision- and policymakers need to be more precise in how the upcoming policy debate around these questions is structured and sequenced. As much as the 'what' of civilian CSDP matters, care should be taken not to splinter the debate too much. Parallel discussions in different policy forums, or, for example, discussions of host country engagement should not bypass the more 'philosophical' questions of prioritization or the types of crises civilian CSDP can address. Otherwise, there is a high risk of once again falling short of the ambitions set by the compacts. Although this paper cannot explore them in detail, the different forms of geographical and functional prioritization discussed in the debate—and the signalling impact and 360°-eastern pivot axes they represent—can be combined into scenarios that could serve as useful heuristic devices for framing future policy debate.

Finally, if civilian CSDP is to maintain and enhance its strategic relevance, it will be important not to get lost in the instrument's technicalities. It needs to be seen in context as one tool among many in the EU's and member states' foreign and security toolbox, to be applied in circumstances where civilian CSDP is the most appropriate tool for the EU and member states to address risks and challenges. The starting point for any strategic reflection must therefore be the security environment in which Europe finds itself.

Abbreviations

Civilian CSDP	Civilian Common Security and Defence Policy
EEAS	European External Action Service
EU	European Union
FIMI	Foreign information manipulation and interference
PCM.1	Division for an Integrated Approach for Peace and Security
PCM.3	Division for Strategic Planning for Crisis Management

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AINO ESSER

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