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Revisiting The Eu as A Regional Actor: A Strategic Approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the viability and effectiveness of the European Union's approach in responding to the political, security, and governance challenges following the fall of the Berlin Wall. It examines the EU s four-pronged approach to assess EU engagement: (1) the EU's strategy toward sub-regional frameworks, focusing on its efforts to promote stability, cooperation, and resilience in neighboring regions; (2) the EU's crisis management concepts, evaluating mechanisms for rapid response, conflict prevention, and operational coordination; (3) the evolution of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), analyzing how the EU's security and defense instruments have developed to support both regional and strategic objectives; and (4) the EU enlargement strategy, considering its role in shaping political, economic, and normative alignment across prospective and neighboring member states. By integrating these dimensions, such as it was conceived from the outset by the EU Commission, the paper highlights both strengths and limitations in the EU's post-Cold War engagement, emphasizing the interplay between strategic policy design, operational capacity, and normative influence.

Keywords: Regional Cooperation, Europe's Competing Core Areas, EEAS and Subregionals., EEEAS, Subregional Cooperation, CFSP, Governance.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, the European Union has progressively developed its approach to regional cooperation beyond its borders, moving from largely ad hoc engagement toward a **more harmonized, strategic, and normative framework**. In the early post-Cold War period, EU engagement was primarily **purpose-driven**, focusing on crisis response, stabilization, and ad hoc project support. Key examples include EU involvement in the Black Sea and Baltic regions, where guidelines emphasized economic reconstruction, cross-border infrastructure, and the promotion of democratic governance. Coordination across EU institutions and member states was limited, and harmonization of objectives across regions was largely aspirational.

By contrast, **from the 2000s onward**, the EU increasingly framed regional cooperation through **strategic guidelines that integrated multiple policy dimensions**—economic, political, environmental, and security—within a coherent external action framework. Instruments such as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the Northern Dimension, and EU external funding mechanisms (e.g., IPA, ENI, Interreg external actions) reflected **institutionalized harmonization**, aligning member state initiatives with EU-level objectives. Guidelines emphasized:

- **Normative coherence**: promoting EU values, human rights, and rule of law across regional platforms.
- **Cross-sectoral integration**: linking economic development, environmental protection, and security agendas.
- **Multi-level governance**: coordinating EU institutions, member states, and regional actors.
- **Strategic long-term planning**: focusing on connectivity, sustainability, and conflict prevention.

By 2025, the EU's approach is **highly harmonized across regions**, with a clearer set of parameters for engagement, including:

1. **Purposeful activities**: while concrete projects remain central (energy grids, transport corridors, scientific cooperation), the EU increasingly embeds these in a **strategic narrative**, connecting them to broader foreign policy and security objectives.
2. **Normative and policy alignment**: harmonization is no longer just about funding projects; it encompasses regulatory compatibility, environmental standards, and human rights promotion.
3. **Goal achievements**: measurable outcomes include strengthened cross-border connectivity

(Baltic and Black Sea regions), establishment of stable regional governance platforms (UfM, Arctic Council), improved environmental and scientific collaboration, and incremental progress toward regional security and economic integration. However, achievements are uneven: progress is constrained in politically contested regions (e.g., Black Sea, Barents with Russian participation), and strategic objectives sometimes remain aspirational rather than fully realized.

Evaluation: Harmonization of EU political guidelines has evolved from **ad hoc, activity-focused interventions** to **strategically coordinated, normative-driven engagement**. Purposeful activities remain central but are now embedded in a broader framework linking projects to EU strategic, environmental, and security objectives. Success is context-dependent: regions with strong institutional capacity and alignment with EU interests show tangible results, while politically sensitive areas highlight the limits of EU influence. Overall, the trajectory demonstrates a clear trend toward **institutionalized, harmonized, and multi-dimensional regional cooperation**, representing a significant maturation of EU external action over three decades.

Definition of Terms

Purposeful Activities

In the context of EU regional cooperation, **purposeful activities** are actions, programs, or initiatives deliberately designed and implemented to achieve clearly defined objectives that align with EU strategic priorities and values. These activities are not ad hoc or incidental; they are **planned, goal-oriented, and linked to broader political, economic, or normative aims**. Purposeful activities can range from joint infrastructure projects, cross-border environmental initiatives, or regional scientific collaborations, to institutional capacity-building, rule-of-law training, or conflict-prevention initiatives.

Key characteristics of purposeful activities include:

1. **Intentionality:** Each activity has a clearly defined objective that corresponds to EU regional strategy or CFSP priorities, such as promoting stability, resilience, governance, or sustainable development.
2. **Strategic alignment:** Activities are embedded within multi-year frameworks and coordinated with other EU initiatives to ensure coherence across regions, sectors, and institutions.
3. **Measurability:** Activities are designed to produce observable results or outputs, enabling monitoring and evaluation.
4. **Resource allocation:** Purposeful activities are backed by dedicated funding, technical support, and institutional commitment, ensuring that implementation is feasible and effective.

Examples of purposeful activities include the establishment of a Black Sea energy connectivity corridor, EU-supported Arctic climate research programs, UfM-backed renewable energy projects, or cross-border governance training in the Baltic region.

Impact

Impact refers to the **long-term, tangible, and sustainable changes or outcomes** that result from purposeful activities. In other words, impact measures whether the EU's interventions have **effectively translated strategic objectives into real-world results** that improve conditions in the targeted region or sector. Impact is broader than outputs (which are immediate deliverables, such as a completed project or trained official); it focuses on the **actual changes in behavior, institutions, systems, or communities** that reflect the success of EU engagement.

Key dimensions of impact include:

1. **Political impact:** Strengthening governance, enhancing regional stability, improving cooperation, or reinforcing adherence to EU norms and values.
2. **Economic impact:** Increasing cross-border trade, improving infrastructure, or generating sustainable development outcomes in the region.
3. **Environmental and social impact:** Advancing climate resilience, protecting ecosystems, or promoting social inclusion and human rights.
4. **Strategic impact:** Ensuring that EU interventions contribute to broader CFSP objectives, such as conflict prevention, regional security, or geopolitical influence.

For example, a purposeful activity like supporting cross-border renewable energy infrastructure in the Black Sea region has immediate outputs (installed energy facilities, trained personnel) but its impact is seen in enhanced energy security, reduced carbon emissions, improved regional integration, and strengthened alignment with EU climate and foreign policy objectives.

In short: Purposeful activities are **deliberate, strategic interventions**, while impact is the **long-term effect of those interventions on the ground**, measurable in terms of political, economic, social, environmental, and strategic outcomes. Ensuring that purposeful activities are designed with impact in mind is central to effective, CFSP-aligned regional cooperation.

Argument

We argue about the evolution of EU political guidelines on regional cooperation by asserting that the EU's approach has shifted from ad hoc engagement to a more strategic and harmonized framework. This claim is supported by evidence from historical context, policy changes, and the establishment of frameworks that align with broader geopolitical objectives. The argument is characterized by

clarity and coherence, making it accessible for scrutiny by policymakers and scholars alike.

The scope of the document defines the boundaries of the analysis, focusing on the evolution of EU political guidelines from the 1990s to 2025. It addresses specific aspects such as the context of regional cooperation, the various subregions involved (e.g., Black Sea, Baltic Sea), and the limitations of previous approaches. By outlining these parameters, the document ensures that the analysis remains relevant and manageable, allowing for a focused investigation into the effectiveness of the EU's strategies.

The objectivs of the paper is to examine the conditions under which the consolidation of the EEAS' EURAC Unit into an Office of the Sub-regionals would be appropriate, and by appropriate we mean that such a consolidation aligns with the rational interests of key actors, ensures efficient allocation of resources, strengthens coordination across EU subregional initiatives, and maximizes the collective benefits for member states and partner countries. It implies a structure in which the costs of establishing and maintaining the office are outweighed by the political, economic, and security gains generated through coherent subregional engagement. Appropriateness also entails the presence of institutional incentives that encourage active participation and prevent free-riding, ensuring that all relevant actors contribute to and benefit from the consolidated framework. Finally, it requires that the office enhances the EU's capacity to implement integrated policies, monitor outcomes effectively, and respond adaptively to emerging challenges, thereby producing durable and measurable improvements in regional stability, resilience, and integration.

The second objective is to evaluate the effectiveness of EU regional cooperation and to propose recommendations for enhancing its impact in line with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) objectives. These objectives are specific enough to assess how well the EU's initiatives align with its strategic goals. For instance, one objective might be to determine the effectiveness of specific projects in promoting stability and governance in targeted regions.

Research Questions

The document implicitly raises several research questions that guide the evaluation of EU political guidelines. These questions may include:

- What are the key changes in the EU's approach to regional cooperation over the past three decades?
- How effectively do current EU initiatives align with CFSP objectives?
- What are the measurable impacts of EU interventions in various subregions?

These questions are clear and focused, providing a framework for the analysis and ensuring that the investigation addresses critical gaps in existing knowledge.

Significance

The significance of the document lies in its potential impact on understanding the EU's role in regional cooperation and its broader implications for international relations. It highlights the importance of aligning EU initiatives with normative values such as human rights and environmental sustainability. By addressing why the study matters, the document contributes to the existing body of knowledge and offers insights that may influence future policy decisions and strategic planning within the EU.

Literature review

Subregional Cooperation in the New Europe by Andrew Cottey adopts an **institu-tional-comparative and multi-level governance perspective** that situates subregional cooperation as a distinct but under-studied component of the post-Cold War European security order. The editors and contributors frame the book around the thesis that regional cooperation in Europe cannot be understood solely through the lenses of the European Union or NATO; instead, a constellation of **subregional organizations**—whether formal bodies like the Barents Euro-Arctic Council or more informal groupings such as the Visegrad Group—plays a formative role in shaping political, economic, and security dynamics in Europe's peripheries. The methodological canvas combines **case study analysis**, **institutional history**, and **normative inquiry** into how subregional frameworks contribute to integration, prosperity, and security amid shifting geopolitical contexts. The research emerges from a major international project by the Institute for EastWest Studies, lending it empirical depth across regions from the Arctic to the Black Sea.

Main Analytical Points

1. **Emergence of Subregional Cooperation**: The book's central analytical thrust is that the end of the Cold War created fertile ground for subregional institutions as **responses to both opportunity and uncertainty**. These groupings emerged where shared geography, culture, or post-transition needs provided a basis for cooperative action beyond state-centric diplomacy.
2. **Case Studies Across Europe**: Each major subregional initiative—the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, the Council of Baltic Sea States, Visegrad, CEFTA, the Central European Initiative, and the Black Sea Economic Cooperation—is examined in depth. These studies trace **origins, institutional trajectories, and internal dynamics**, showing how distinct historical legacies and political economies shape cooperation.
3. **Normative Contributions to Security**: The volume situates subregional cooperation not only as functional governance but also as **norm-producing mechanisms** that reinforce democratic practices, common rules, and shared frameworks for conflict management in ways

that are complementary to larger institutions like the EU or NATO.

4. **Interface with EU and NATO**: A significant analytical focus is on how these subregional bodies relate to broader European structures. While not alternatives to EU/NATO integration, they often serve **bridging functions**—facilitating integration for aspiring members, smoothing transition challenges, and offering platforms for dialogue where larger institutions are absent or less effective.
5. **Security Architecture Implications**: In the chapters on European security architecture, Cottey and others argue that subregional cooperation is **constitutive** of the emerging multi-institutional security order. Rather than a hierarchical system dominated solely by the EU and NATO, European security is increasingly **plural and layered**, with subregional groups occupying distinctive niches that reflect both constraints and potentials of post-1990 geopolitics.
6. **Broadening the Lens of Regionalism**: The final sections extend the analysis to emerging patterns in Southeast Europe, the Newly Independent States, and the Mediterranean, indicating that subregional cooperation is not monolithic but varies in function, effectiveness, and institutional resilience.

While the book was ground-breaking—and widely recognized as the first serious comprehensive study of European subregionalism— and helped inform EU policy at both declaratory and organisational level, it also displays **limitations that later scholarship has highlighted**:

1. **Historical Context Over Contemporary Geopolitics**: Because it was published in the late 1990s, the analysis is anchored in the immediate post-Cold War context. It does not anticipate—and therefore does not fully wrestle with—later challenges such as **renewed great-power competition**, asymmetric geoeconomic pressures, or Russia's assertive foreign policy after 2014, which have dramatically altered subregional dynamics.
2. **Institutional Effectiveness vs Aspirations**: The book often assumes that subregional bodies have coherent capacities and shared objectives. Later assessments note that these organizations can be **heterogeneous in ambition and capacity**, and that their strategic impact can be limited when major powers or larger institutions disengage.
3. **Normative Bias Toward Integration**: There is a **normative optimism** about subregional cooperation's contribution to democracy and prosperity. While important, this perspective sometimes understates **structural constraints** such as economic asymmetries, internal political volatility, or external geopolitical pressures that can stymie cooperation.
4. **Integration with EU/NATO Viewed as Primarily Positive**: The volume generally treats integration with the EU and NATO as desirable and stabilizing. Later critiques argue that this framing can obscure how enlargement boundaries and internal EU policy shifts create **new divides and strategic dilemmas** for subregional actors.
5. **Static Institutional Analysis**: The case studies provide rich descriptions of institutional structures circa the late 1990s but less emphasis on **evolutionary dynamics**—how these bodies adapt (or fail to adapt) over time in response to shifting security and economic conditions.

Despite these critiques, *Subregional Cooperation in the New Europe* remains a **seminal contribution** to the field. It laid the groundwork for subsequent scholarship that sees European security and cooperation as **multi-layered**, involving not only the EU and NATO but also diverse subregional networks. Its value lies in its **comprehensive comparative scope**, rigorous case documentation, and theoretical framing that situates subregional cooperation as a **key building block of post-Cold War regional governance**, not merely an ancillary phenomenon.

Scholarly contributions

Regional conflict theory examines disputes that occur beyond local or national boundaries, spanning regions, cross-border areas, or clusters of states. It integrates political drivers such as state rivalry, governance weakness, or competition over influence; economic drivers including resource competition, trade asymmetries, or development disparities; socio-cultural drivers like ethnic, religious, or linguistic tensions that cut across borders; and geostrategic drivers such as strategic locations, maritime routes, or regional hubs. The theory is both descriptive, explaining what is happening, analytical, explaining why it is happening, and predictive, indicating what may happen next.

One way to structure analysis is through phases of conflict. In the first phase, latent tensions or pre-conflict, the potential for conflict exists but has not yet erupted. Causes include unresolved historical grievances, resource pressures, border disputes, or weak institutions. Analysis focuses on mapping root causes, identifying high-risk areas, and social fault lines. The second phase is the trigger or escalation phase, in which a specific event or change sparks confrontation. Examples include a coup, border incident, terrorist attack, or economic shock. Here, analysis tracks escalation mechanisms, the actors involved, and the risk of regional spillover. The third phase is open conflict, where violence or confrontation becomes visible through armed clashes, political standoffs, or economic sanctions. Analysis focuses on intensity, duration, and regional diffusion, including alliances, proxy support, and humanitarian impact. The fourth phase is stalemate or containment, in which the conflict may plateau without resolution. Regional actors may attempt mediation or containment, and analysis evaluates the effectiveness of regional organizations, cross-border interventions, sanctions, and diplomacy. The final phase is resolution or transformation, when conflict ends or transforms into a different form, such as a frozen conflict or through peacebuilding and integration efforts. Analysis in

this phase looks at peace agreements, reconstruction, institutional reforms, and regional cooperation mechanisms.

The phased approach allows for descriptive identification of a conflict's stage and the key actors, prescriptive or preventive recommendations to manage or avert escalation, and comparative analysis of conflicts across regions to identify patterns, such as resource-driven conflicts in Africa or political conflicts in Europe and the Middle East. Common frameworks in the literature include Edward Azar's protracted social conflicts approach, which emphasizes identity and unmet basic needs across borders; John Burton's conflict resolution theory, which focuses on human needs and regional governance; and Barry Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory, which treats regions as units where security threats are mostly local but interact across borders.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is constrained by the availability and reliability of data, which in some cases may be incomplete, outdated, or subject to reporting biases. Second, the study focuses primarily on a specific geographic and temporal context, limiting the generalizability of its findings to other regions or time periods. Third, methodological choices, including the selection of indicators and analytical frameworks, may influence the results and interpretations, introducing potential bias. Fourth, certain qualitative aspects, such as informal diplomatic interactions or behind-the-scenes decision-making processes, could not be fully captured within the scope of this research. Finally, while the study aims to provide policy-relevant insights, its recommendations remain contingent on future political developments and external factors beyond the researchers' control.

Above all, our scholarly contribution lies in elucidating how the various components of the EU's post–Cold War approach have become unhinged and out of sync. We do so by systematically analyzing the interplay between subregional strategies, the Crisis Management Concept, the evolution of the CSDP, and the Enlargement Strategy, highlighting gaps, misalignments, and missed opportunities in the integration of strategic objectives, operational capacity, and normative influence. By cross-tabulating these frameworks with the dimensions of strategy, operations, and norms, we reveal where the EU's ambitions have outpaced its mechanisms, and where operational successes have failed to translate into lasting strategic or normative impact. Our analysis demonstrates that fragmented governance, dispersed institutional responsibilities, and inconsistent evaluation have undermined the coherence of EU external action. Moreover, we interrogate the tension between short-term crisis responses and long-term policy objectives, showing how reactive measures can inadvertently weaken the EU's normative credibility. By tracing these disjunctions, the paper identifies structural and procedural reforms necessary to realign EU initiatives, enhance synergy among its instruments, and strengthen its influence in neighboring regions and beyond.

Methodology

The methodology of this essay uses AI-assisted analysis to study the EU's post-Cold War security policy, retrieving online stored material transformed form information into knowledge to write this essay. Primary sources, including EU treaties, CSDP mission reports, and strategic documents, are fed into the AI system for text mining and thematic extraction. Secondary sources such as academic papers and policy analyses are used to train and validate the AI insights. The AI identifies patterns, trends, and key policy shifts in crisis management, strategic autonomy, and enlargement. Sentiment and content analysis are applied to evaluate policy emphasis and priorities over time. Comparative techniques highlight changes in EU security posture before and after key events. The approach ensures systematic, data-driven interpretation while preserving contextual understanding. Overall, AI supports a comprehensive and objective assessment of the EU's evolving security strategy.

Structure

The structure of the piece mirrors its practical purpose.

State of Play: EU Environment through Regional Conflict Theory This section maps the EU's strategic environment through the phases of regional conflict theory, identifying escalation dynamics and stabilisation gaps. It assesses subregional theatres and draws out implications for EEAS strategic posture and anticipatory capacity.

Regional Security Scan: NATO–EU Combined Perspective We conduct a joint NATO–EU regional security scan to examine complementarities in deterrence, defence, and crisis management. The focus is on how institutional coordination can translate into effective security provision across Europe's wider environment.

Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Faultlines and the Case for a Commission Géopolitique This section analyses conflict drivers at the intersection of geopolitics and geoeconomics, where strategic competition increasingly materialises. It argues that renewed political seriousness around a Commission Géopolitique is essential for credibility under a second von der Leyen mandate.

Subregional Organisations in and around the EU: Structural Challenges Here we assess the political and institutional constraints affecting subregional organisations surrounding the EU. The analysis highlights fragmentation, mandate ambiguity, and uneven political leverage.

Political Guidelines Governing Subregional Engagement This section reviews the political guidelines

shaping EU engagement with subregional organisations, as regularly updated and adopted by the Council at EEAS initiative. It examines their coherence, strategic clarity, and operational relevance.

EEAS Representation and Objectives across Subregional Frameworks We compare the level and form of EEAS representation across subregional organisations, alongside their respective objectives and governance logics. The aim is to identify gaps between ambition, presence, and influence.

Reassessing Political Guidelines and Proposing an EU Subregional Strategy Returning to the state of play, this section reassesses existing political guidelines in light of empirical findings. It then proposes a coherent EU strategy for subregional engagement aligned with CFSP priorities.

Designing a New Office for EU Subregionals within the EEAS The final section outlines the rationale and design principles for a dedicated Office for EU Subregionals within the EEAS, conceived as an expanded EurArc. It integrates political, geographic, and thematic strands into a single strategic interface.

From Change Manager to Security Provider

This section reframes the role of the European External Action Service from a reactive coordinator of policies into a strategic leader capable of shaping political outcomes. It argues that the EEAS must move beyond managing incremental change and instead exercise agenda-setting authority, narrative control, and strategic foresight across regions and instruments. Leadership, in this sense, is defined not by centralisation but by the ability to align dispersed actors, resources, and timelines around shared CFSP priorities.

Division of Labor and Integration of Effort in a Network-Centric EEAS Framework Building on the leadership imperative, this section examines how a clearer division of labor—combined with tighter integration of effort—can enhance the EEAS's effectiveness in a networked institutional environment. It explores how headquarters, EU delegations, Commission services, CSDP missions, and Member State actors can operate as a single strategic system rather than parallel silos. The focus is on orchestration, information flows, and decision-rights rather than formal hierarchy. We build on the Eurarc Unit in the EEAS for the establishment of an Office for the EU's Subregionals proper.

Enhancing the Impact of EU Regional Cooperation in Line with CFSP Objectives This section situates regional and subregional cooperation as a core delivery mechanism for the CFSP, not a peripheral or technical exercise. It analyses how regional formats can amplify EU political influence, resilience-building, and conflict-prevention when they are explicitly linked to strategic objectives. Particular attention is given to avoiding "forum fatigue" and ensuring that regional engagement produces measurable political and security dividends.

Proposed KPIs for EU Regional Cooperation Aligned with CFSP Objectives and Values To move from intent to accountability, this section proposes a set of qualitative and quantitative KPIs tailored to EU regional cooperation. These indicators go beyond activity-based metrics to capture political alignment, partner behaviour, institutional durability, and value-based outcomes such as inclusiveness, rule-of-law uptake, and conflict-sensitivity. The aim is to equip the EEAS with tools to assess strategic return on engagement rather than mere absorption of funds.

Ends, Ways, and Means of the EU's Approach to Subregional Cooperation This section applies a classical strategic framework to EU subregional engagement, clarifying what the Union seeks to achieve (ends), how it intends to do so (ways), and with which instruments and resources (means). It highlights frequent mismatches between ambition and capability and argues for a more disciplined alignment between political objectives, diplomatic formats, financial instruments, and administrative capacity. Subregional cooperation is presented as a force multiplier when properly calibrated.

CSDP Connections

The post-Cold War instability in Eastern Europe and the Balkans showed that the EU needed coordinated military and civilian crisis management. The CSDP missions, such as EUFOR and EU NAVFOR, reflect the EU's response capability, which traces back to recognizing gaps after the Cold War ended. The fall of the Berlin Wall eventually led to Eastern European countries joining the EU. CSDP structures had to integrate these new members, emphasizing collective security, shared defense capabilities, and joint missions. The Wall's fall highlighted the need for Europe to be capable of independent security action, rather than relying solely on the US or NATO. The CSDP represents the EU's long-term answer to that challenge, enabling civilian and military operations independent of NATO when needed.

Evaluating on the EU's Concept for Crisis Management

The EU's enlargement strategy increasingly emphasizes gradual governance alignment and regional stability rather than rapid accession. Sub-regional engagement has emerged as a practical instrument to foster cooperation, reduce bilateral tensions, and build functional interdependence among candidate and partner states. However, these frameworks often remain under-institutionalized and insufficiently linked to formal accession incentives, limiting their strategic impact. Strengthened regional cooperation could enhance political ownership, harmonize policies, and reinforce the credibility of the enlargement process. In the context of crisis management, regional networks enable early warning,

collective resilience, and coordinated preventive action across neighboring states. Current EU crisis-management mechanisms remain reactive, with fragmented leadership and uneven operational integration, which regional cooperation could help address. Integrating sub-regional engagement into both enlargement and crisis-management frameworks would increase coherence, reduce systemic vulnerabilities, and align EU objectives with local realities. Overall, regional cooperation functions as a critical bridge linking long-term integration, preventive stability, and the Union's broader strategic influence.

Enlargement Strategy

The **EU enlargement strategy** is the framework through which the European Union manages the accession of new member states. Historically, enlargement has been a key instrument for promoting **stability, democracy, and economic development** in Europe, particularly after the end of the Cold War. The EU's enlargement strategy is guided by **clear criteria**, known as the **Copenhagen criteria**, which require candidate countries to have stable democratic institutions, a functioning market economy, and the ability to adopt and implement EU laws and standards, the **acquis communautaire**.

The strategy also emphasizes **regional cooperation**, good neighborly relations, and respect for human rights. Over the years, enlargement has served as a tool to promote peace and security, integrating countries from Central and Eastern Europe that were formerly part of the Soviet sphere, as well as candidates from the Western Balkans. EU enlargement is not only about admitting new members but also about encouraging **reforms and alignment with EU policies** before full accession.

At present, the enlargement strategy is focused on the Western Balkans and some Eastern European partners. Candidate countries such as Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, and North Macedonia are in various stages of accession negotiations, working to meet EU standards in governance, rule of law, and economic reforms. The strategy also involves a careful assessment of the EU's absorption capacity, ensuring that integration does not compromise the Union's cohesion.

In addition, the EU's current enlargement approach emphasizes **stability and resilience**, particularly in response to geopolitical challenges, such as conflicts in Ukraine and the broader Eastern neighborhood. The EU uses financial assistance, technical support, and diplomatic engagement to help candidate countries advance reforms and strengthen institutions. While enlargement remains a long-term process, the strategy reflects the EU's commitment to fostering **peace, democracy, and economic development** across Europe, while balancing internal and external strategic interests.

It is by far the better managed among the EU's responses to the fall of the Wall, and has recently been strengthened and be reinforced further.

Governance

Towards a Professional Defense organisation

The organisation of Europe Defense remains primarily anchored in EEAS and its CSDP directorate and in DG DEFIS, despite evidence suggest the loyalty and interest of the professional soldier is only obtained through a unitary organisation. We examine the evolving challenges this poses in the current security environment, as the Eu moves from presence over shaper of policy to security provider before becoming a defense actor in its own right.

Interventions Dovetailing with the CFSP Objectives and Values Focusing on implementation, this section examines how concrete interventions—dialogues, capacity-building, infrastructure support, security cooperation, and regulatory alignment—can be designed to reinforce CFSP objectives and EU normative commitments. It stresses the importance of sequencing, political conditionality, and context-sensitivity to ensure that interventions strengthen, rather than dilute, EU credibility and coherence.

Ensuring Congruence between Interventions and Budget Lines This section addresses the persistent gap between strategic intent and financial execution. It analyses how misaligned budget lines, fragmented funding cycles, and instrument rigidity can undermine CFSP-driven regional engagement. The section proposes mechanisms for tighter strategic programming, enhanced EEAS influence over financial instruments, and clearer political guidance embedded in funding decisions.

EU Engagement with Russia Across Subregional Frameworks This section explores how the EU can manage engagement with Russia through subregional and multilateral frameworks without compromising CFSP principles. It distinguishes between containment, selective engagement, and risk-management logics, and assesses which subregional formats allow for pragmatic interaction while safeguarding EU unity and values. The focus is on strategic consistency across the EU's eastern, northern, and maritime neighbourhoods.

Engaging the Visegrad Four, the Central European Initiative, and the GCC The final section analyses differentiated engagement with three distinct subregional groupings that intersect EU internal cohesion, neighbourhood policy, and external strategic interests. It examines how the EEAS can tailor its approach to the political dynamics of the V4, leverage the CEI as a bridge between EU and non-EU Europe, and engage the GCC as a pivotal partner in security, energy, and connectivity. The emphasis is on managing divergence while preserving strategic alignment with CFSP goals.

Strengthening of regional cooperation

Strengthening regional cooperation as called for by the Central European Initiative (CEI) can enhance political cohesion, economic integration, and strategic resilience across the EU's neighborhood. The CEI offers a platform for dialogue, project-based collaboration, and capacity-building among member and partner states, supporting both enlargement objectives and sub-regional stability. By institutionalizing regular coordination and information-sharing, the CEI can reinforce early-warning mechanisms and facilitate preventive crisis management. Regional cooperation under the CEI also allows smaller or less-developed states to align with EU standards and participate meaningfully in policy implementation. Enhanced CEI engagement strengthens multilateral problem-solving, reduces bilateral frictions, and promotes harmonized regulatory practices. When linked with EU enlargement policy, the CEI can serve as a preparatory stage for accession, translating regional alignment into tangible incentives. Integrating CEI initiatives into EU crisis-management frameworks would improve coordination, operational readiness, and burden-sharing in response to transnational threats. Overall, the CEI exemplifies how structured regional cooperation can bridge policy objectives, promote stability, and consolidate the EU's strategic influence in Central and Eastern Europe.

Theoretical Appraisal

After the completion of the study we look into how to understand the evolution of the Eu as an actor on the European continent and its collective struggles and performance as change manager in theoretical terms.

Conclusions

In the conclusions, we summarise our findings. Our analysis shows that the EU's macro-regional strategies for the Baltic Sea, Black Sea, and Adriatic–Ionian regions serve as overarching frameworks that integrate policy priorities, foster cross-border cooperation, and provide strategic guidance to both member and neighboring states or are empty shells to uphold existing EU programs such and cross border cooperation programs dear to many Europeans rather than legitimizing power and control mechanism belonging to a bygone era.

The Subregionals whose founding have mostly been stimulated by the EU Commission for reasons of managing territorial change in Europe and by the riparians to address shared challenges in their own geography in the context of the reemergence of competing core areas in Europe following the fall of the Wall. As such the regional organisations serve differentiated objectives translating broad EU policy into concrete projects adapted to local conditions. Enlargement functions as a stabilizing mechanism by incentivizing political, economic, and legal reforms in candidate countries, reinforcing trust and cooperation across the EU neighborhood, whereas the EU's concept of crisis management provides a reactive and preventive framework to address immediate threats, mitigate regional instability, and coordinate collective responses. Together, these instruments complement each other: enlargement promotes long-term structural resilience, while crisis management addresses short-term vulnerabilities. By integrating sub-regional engagement and strengthened regional cooperation, the EU can align preventive measures with governance incentives, ensuring that reforms in candidate and neighboring states are supported by operational readiness and early-warning capacities. This dual approach enhances both normative influence and strategic security, allowing the EU to shape its periphery while managing emergent crises more effectively.

Together, these layers form a dynamic governance architecture linking EU internal cohesion with regional stability.

To understand this theoretically, we could adopt a layered approach that illustrates the interplay between **macro-level governance structures** and **meso-level operational mechanisms**. It highlights how policy diffusion occurs across multiple scales and demonstrates the EU's use of conditionality and integrative frameworks to shape political behavior beyond its borders in a selective and non-uniform manner. This reinforces the concept that regionalization and enlargement are mutually reinforcing instruments of stability and governance, rather than separate policy tracks.

Counterarguments suggest that reliance on enlargement as a stabilizing tool may be limited where accession prospects are uncertain or politically contentious. Similarly, macro-regional strategies risk fragmentation if subregional actors pursue competing priorities or if funding and institutional capacity are insufficient. External geopolitical pressures, such as competing regional powers or transnational conflicts, could also undermine the coherence of EU strategies in these seas.

Scenario analysis indicates that success depends on coordination, trust, and adaptability. In a **positive scenario**, coordinated MRS and subregional initiatives, aligned with credible accession paths, reinforce stability, economic growth, and environmental resilience across the EU neighborhood. In a **cautious scenario**, partial implementation, weak funding, or geopolitical shocks could limit the stabilizing impact, creating patchy integration and uneven governance outcomes. In a **negative scenario**, persistent political deadlock, external interference, or stalled enlargement could weaken both subregional cooperation and macro-regional cohesion, leaving key areas vulnerable to instability.

Policy recommendations follow from these findings. First, macro-regional strategies should be explicitly linked to enlargement benchmarks to ensure candidate countries gain tangible incentives for reform. Second, cross-sea connectivity and multi-level governance structures should be strengthened, creating an integrated "maritime spine"

that connects subregions and enhances resilience. Third, trust-building mechanisms should be institutionalized to facilitate cooperation between EU members, candidate countries, and neighboring states. Fourth, project portfolios should integrate economic development, environmental protection, and conflict prevention to secure long-term stability. Finally, continuous monitoring and adaptive management are necessary to respond to geopolitical shifts and ensure that macro- and subregional strategies remain mutually reinforcing and politically credible.

In sum, the EU's macro-regional strategies, subregional initiatives, and enlargement policy together constitute a layered, forward-looking governance framework. When effectively coordinated, they not only enhance regional development and integration but also function as instruments of trust, resilience, and stabilization across Europe's maritime neighborhoods.

Yet, Europes near abroad notably the MED and along the Eastern border with Russia is on fire. War is looming with Russia if the Eu doesn't get its act together while China is moving in on the Eu's turf being the number one trader of KSA, Iran, Egypt and Algeria. To coin Frederica Morgherini when she acceded to office by crisis, crisis, crisis. To address this apparent paradox we will examine the governance gaps of the EEAS management of the EU's near abroad and to which extent lack of rigor is at fault ,and so shall we all.

2.State of Play in Europe and adjacent areas

Regional Security Conflict Context

Regional conflict theory offers a powerful lens for understanding why certain areas of the world — including the regions adjacent to Europe — experience persistent insecurity, overlapping disputes, and recurring geopolitical and geoeconomic tensions. In academic terms, it is most closely associated with the **Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)** developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, which argues that security dynamics are not evenly distributed across the international system but instead cluster into **regional complexes** where states' security concerns are deeply interlinked.

At its core, regional conflict theory begins from the premise that **geography shapes security**. States located near one another inevitably develop patterns of rivalry, interdependence, and vulnerability that cannot be explained solely by global power politics. These patterns form what RSCT calls a *regional security complex*: a set of states whose security problems are so interconnected that none can be understood in isolation. Conflicts in such complexes tend to be self-sustaining, because threats, fears, and power imbalances circulate within the region and reinforce one another. External powers may intervene, but they rarely determine the underlying structure; instead, they amplify or manipulate dynamics already present.

A second foundational idea is that **regional conflicts are multidimensional**, combining military, political, societal, economic, and environmental pressures. This multidimensionality explains why geopolitical and geoeconomic tensions often overlap. Territorial disputes, energy dependencies, ethnic divisions, and infrastructure competition all feed into the same regional security logic. In Europe's near abroad, for example, military confrontation in the Black Sea cannot be separated from pipeline politics, nor can political instability in the Western Balkans be detached from economic fragmentation and external investment strategies.

Regional conflict theory also emphasises the role of **regional organisations** as both arenas and instruments of security management. Sub-regional bodies — such as the Regional Cooperation Council in the Western Balkans, the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, or the Council of the Baltic Sea States — function as institutional expressions of regional interdependence. They provide mechanisms for dialogue, confidence-building, and economic coordination, and they can either mitigate or exacerbate conflict depending on their design and the political will of their members.

Finally, the theory highlights the importance of **external actors**, particularly great powers, which often seek to shape regional security complexes without fully controlling them. In the near abroad, the European Union, Russia, China, and Turkey all interact with local dynamics in ways that blend geopolitical ambition with geoeconomic leverage. Regional conflict theory helps explain why these interventions have such profound effects: they enter a system already structured by dense patterns of local rivalry and vulnerability.

In sum, regional conflict theory provides the conceptual foundation for analysing the EU's surrounding neighbourhood. It shows why conflicts cluster in specific regions, why they persist, and why effective engagement requires working through sub-regional organisations that reflect the underlying structure of regional security. This theoretical grounding is essential for designing EEAS intervention priorities that are sensitive to the realities of Europe's adjacent regions.

The Security environment at a glance

Europe and its surrounding regions present a **highly fragmented security and economic landscape**, shaped by geography, history, and varying institutional capacity. Across the frameworks of the **Arctic Council, Baltic Council, Black Sea Council, Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), Nordic Council, GCC, Central European Initiative (CEI), SEECP, and Visegrád 4**, the **state of play** can be analyzed in terms of contextual environment, threats, vulnerabilities, actors, capacities, risks, policy, and geopolitical/economic conflict material.

1–2. Context and Threats

The **Arctic region** is emerging as a zone of strategic rivalry due to climate change opening new shipping lanes and access to energy and mineral resources. While sparsely populated, its sovereignty claims and militarization of key passages highlight latent conflict potential.

The **Baltic and Black Sea regions** remain flashpoints of **high-intensity geopolitical tension**. Proximity to Russia and ongoing hybrid and kinetic threats amplify both military and economic vulnerability. The **Nordic states** share some of these Arctic pressures but enjoy stable governance and strong defense coordination, while **Central Europe (CEI, V4)** faces indirect risks from Eastern crises like the Ukraine war.

In the **Mediterranean (UfM)** and **SEECP**, threats are more **chronic and diffuse**, combining migration, governance gaps, and post-conflict fragility, rather than direct interstate warfare. The **GCC**, though outside Europe, is included as a comparative geoeconomic actor: its strategic chokepoints and energy dominance influence Europe's security indirectly.

3-Vulnerabilties

Vulnerabilities vary sharply. The **Baltic and Black Sea regions** are structurally exposed: borders are contested, energy infrastructure is dependent on external actors, and local institutions are partially constrained by external pressures. The **Arctic** suffers from sparse governance and logistical challenges.

Southern Europe, including **UfM and SEECP states**, faces **institutional fragility and uneven development**, making them susceptible to socio-economic stress and cross-border illicit flows. **Central European states and the V4** are moderately resilient, though internal political divergence and reliance on EU mechanisms create structural weaknesses. The **Nordic countries** are least vulnerable due to strong institutions and integrated defense systems.

4 -Actors and Power Mapping

Actors range from **great powers (Russia, NATO, EU, US, China)** to regional and non-state entities. In the **Baltic and Black Sea**, Russia's assertiveness shapes nearly all security calculations, while NATO provides deterrence. The **Nordic Council** demonstrates cooperative alignment between states to manage Arctic security. In southern Europe, the **UfM and SEECP** frameworks attempt to coordinate multiple weak states with overlapping external actors. **GCC countries** project economic influence rather than territorial control, shaping geoeconomic outcomes globally.

5–6. Capacities and Risk Assessment

Capacity is uneven. **Nordic, V4, and CEI countries** generally possess high institutional and military capacity, with structured risk assessments. Conversely, **Black Sea and SEECP regions** have fragmented capabilities and elevated escalation risks. The **Arctic region**, while sparsely populated, is seeing rapid strategic investments by key powers, increasing potential flashpoints.

Risk assessment shows a **continuum**: high kinetic risk in the **Baltic and Black Sea**, medium systemic risk in **Central Europe and the Arctic**, and latent socio-economic risk in **UfM and SEECP**.

7. Policy and Mitigation Trajectories

Policy responses range from **deterrence and hard security** in the Baltic and Black Sea, to **institutional integration and cooperation** in the Nordic Council, CEI, and V4. Southern Europe and UfM states focus on **incremental confidence-building**, migration management, and socio-economic stabilization. **GCC states** pursue diversification, strategic alliances, and energy leverage as key mitigation tools.

8. Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Conflict Material

Geopolitical tensions concentrate on **borders, maritime and airspace control, militarized zones, and strategic chokepoints**. The **Baltic, Black Sea, and Arctic** regions are highly sensitive due to contested borders, proximity of great powers, and potential for proxy conflict. Central Europe and V4 face indirect geopolitical stress via dependency on EU/NATO frameworks.

Geoeconomic competition manifests through **energy corridors, trade routes, ports, and infrastructure projects**. The **Black Sea controls grain and energy transit**, the **Arctic offers new shipping and resource access**, and the **GCC exerts global energy influence**. Southern European frameworks (UfM, SEECP) experience structural economic asymmetries that create vulnerabilities to external economic pressure.

In sum, **geopolitics shapes immediate security risk**, while **geoeconomics drives long-term strategic leverage** across all these European-adjacent regions.

Overall Analytical Summary

Europe's regional frameworks exhibit **layered risk profiles**:

- **High kinetic/geopolitical risk**: Baltic, Black Sea
- **Strategic/geoeconomic leverage**: Arctic, Nordic, GCC
- **Latent institutional/economic risk**: UfM, SEECP
- **Moderate risk with integration potential**: CEI, V4

This integrated analysis demonstrates that **security cannot be understood in isolation**: context, threats,

vulnerabilities, actor mapping, capacity, policy, and geoeconomic/geopolitical dynamics all interact to produce a **complex, multi-scalar state of play**.

Table The EU is primary responsible for European security

Regional Framework	1–2 Context & Threats	3 Vulnerabilities	4 Actors & Power	5–6 Capacity & Risk	7 Policy Trajectory	8 Geopolitics & Geoeconomics	9 Suggested Interventions	10 EU Interventions	11 NATO Interventions	
Arctic Council	Climate change + great-power return	Sparse governance, dual-use infrastructure	Arctic states, NATO, Russia	High capacity, rising escalation risk	Norm-based cooperation under strain	Strategic routes, resources, sovereignty claims	Multilateral Arctic agreements; joint scientific & environmental projects; confidence-building in shipping and resource zones	EU Arctic research & environmental funding; regulatory coordination for shipping & energy	NATO joint exercises in Arctic corridor; surveillance of northern maritime routes	
Baltic Region / Council	Acute state threat perception	Border exposure, hybrid pressure	NATO, Russia, EU	Strong deterrence, high escalation risk	Hard security prioritization	Militarized borders, energy decoupling	Enhanced NATO patrols; joint cyber defense; energy diversification; diplomatic channels with Russia	EU energy infrastructure funding; cyber-resilience programs; sanctions coordination	NATO enhanced forward presence; air policing; joint exercises; rapid-reaction deployments	
Black Sea Region	Active interstate war	Fragmented security space	Russia, Ukraine, NATO, Turkey	Extreme risk, weak regional control	Crisis management, deterrence	Maritime control, grain & energy corridors	Ceasefire monitoring; international mediation; humanitarian corridors; joint security forums for shipping & energy	EU humanitarian aid; sanctions enforcement; infrastructure support for Ukraine	NATO Black Sea deterrence patrols; joint naval exercises; air defense cooperation	
Union for the Mediterr	Chronic instability	Governance and develop	EU, MENA states, extern	Limited capacity,	Incremental stabilization	Trade asymmetry, energy	Capacity-building programs; EU-led	EU development funds;	NATO Mediterranean liaison	

anean (UfM)	spillovers	ment gaps	al powers	persistent risk		interdependence	infrastructure investment; dialogue platforms; migration management coordination	trade facilitation; migration management programs	networks; security dialogues; maritime surveillance coordination	
Nordic Council	Stable context, rising threat awareness	Arctic exposure	Nordic states, NATO	High capacity, low internal risk	Collective defense alignment	Energy security, Arctic–Baltic linkage	Strengthen joint defense exercises; Arctic security dialogues; renewable energy cooperation; confidence-building with Russia	EU cross-border energy and climate projects; research programs	NATO Northern Joint Exercises; intelligence sharing; air policing	
GCC	**GCC**	Regional rivalries, chokepoints	External security dependence	Gulf states, Iran, US/China	Strong internal capacity, external risk	Hedging & diversification	Energy leverage, maritime chokepoints	Regional security dialogue forums; energy market stabilization; maritime safety cooperation; crisis de-escalation mechanisms	EU energy cooperation; investment projects; diplomatic mediation	NATO maritime exercises in Red Sea/Arabian Gulf; rapid reaction coordination with partners
Central European Initiative (CEI)	**Central European Initiative (CEI)**	Ukraine war spillover	East–West divergence	EU members & neighbors	Moderate capacity, medium risk	Integration-driven resilience	Transit corridors, infrastructure competition	EU-funded infrastructure projects; cross-border emergency exercises; diplomatic	EU cohesion & infrastructure funds; cross-border transport & energy projects	NATO regional exercises; disaster response drills

								mediation; regional development programs		
SEECP	Post-conflict fragility	Ethnic & border tensions	Weak states, EU influence	Low capacity, latent escalation	Confidence-building focus	Borders, connectivity dependence	Track-two diplomacy; minority rights programs; cross-border economic initiatives; EU rule-of-law support	EU rule-of-law programs; governance & institution-building aid; regional development	NATO partnership programs; conflict prevention training; civil emergency planning	
Visegrád 4	Low direct threat, political friction	Normative & policy divergence	EU-centric actors	High capacity, low kinetic risk	Fragmented coordination	Supply chains, EU economic leverage	Policy coordination forums; joint infrastructure planning; EU mediation on divergent policies; trade and energy alignment mechanisms	EU policy harmonization; funding for infrastructure & research; trade facilitation	NATO exercises with V4 states; coordination on defense modernization	

Implications

The European External Action Service (EEAS) faces a complex and multi-layered operational environment across Europe and its adjacent regions, requiring sub-regional offices to integrate nuanced analyses of geopolitical, geoeconomic, and institutional dynamics. In the Arctic and Nordic regions, climate change, the opening of strategic maritime routes, and a renewed great-power competition necessitate a careful balancing of environmental governance, scientific cooperation, and maritime security. Sub-regional offices must therefore coordinate EU research programs, regulatory frameworks, and confidence-building measures, while engaging in structured dialogue with Arctic states, including Russia, to prevent inadvertent escalation and to sustain the norm-based cooperation that underpins regional stability. At the same time, these offices should align their efforts with NATO-led surveillance and joint exercises, ensuring coherent multilateral oversight of the northern maritime and resource zones.

In the Baltic region, characterized by acute threat perceptions, militarized borders, and persistent hybrid pressures, sub-regional EEAS offices must reconcile the imperatives of deterrence with diplomatic engagement. Their role entails the strategic coordination of EU energy diversification initiatives, cyber resilience programs, and sanctions enforcement, all integrated with NATO's

enhanced forward presence, air policing, and rapid-reaction capabilities. By facilitating cross-border energy and infrastructure projects and maintaining continuous strategic dialogues with Baltic and Nordic capitals, the offices act as pivotal intermediaries, translating EU policy into tangible measures that both mitigate risk and reinforce regional cohesion.

The Black Sea region presents heightened volatility, where active interstate conflict and fragmented security architectures create extreme risk environments. EEAS sub-regional offices are tasked with orchestrating the delivery of humanitarian assistance, implementing sanctions frameworks, and supporting infrastructure resilience, particularly in Ukraine and the surrounding littoral states. This requires an intricate balancing act that combines mediation efforts, the facilitation of maritime and energy corridor security, and close coordination with NATO on naval and air defense operations, thereby ensuring that EU interventions are both responsive and strategically aligned.

Southern European frameworks, including the Union for the Mediterranean and the South-East European Cooperation Process, exhibit chronic instability rooted in governance deficits, socio-economic asymmetries, and post-conflict fragility. Here, EEAS sub-regional offices must prioritize institution-building, rule-of-law programs, and cross-border confidence-building initiatives while mediating between EU and regional partners to enhance governance and economic resilience. These efforts necessitate careful calibration of development assistance, migration management, and trade facilitation to reduce systemic vulnerabilities and foster incremental stabilization.

Central European frameworks, exemplified by the CEI and Visegrád 4, occupy an intermediary position in the regional security continuum. Sub-regional EEAS offices must focus on reinforcing infrastructure integration, aligning transport and energy corridors with EU cohesion objectives, and mediating intra-regional political divergences. In doing so, they ensure that high-capacity states leverage their structural resilience to contribute to broader European stability while also facilitating NATO coordination in defense modernization, disaster response exercises, and rapid-reaction planning.

Across all these regions, EEAS sub-regional offices operate at the nexus of EU and NATO interventions, translating strategic assessments into operational policy. They are charged with synthesizing threat analyses, vulnerability mapping, actor influence, and capacity evaluations into actionable guidance, effectively serving as conduits for early-warning systems and preventive diplomacy. By continuously monitoring border tensions, energy dependencies, strategic corridors, and socio-political fissures, sub-regional offices provide indispensable situational awareness that informs EU policymaking and preempts escalation. In this capacity, they not only operationalize the EU's external action mandate but also contribute to the maintenance of a coherent and resilient European security architecture, balancing geopolitical imperatives with geoeconomic and normative commitments.

Policy Context

Over the past three decades, the European Union's approach to regional cooperation has undergone a profound transformation. In the early 1990s, regional policy was largely inward-looking, focused on reducing disparities within the Union through cohesion funds and cross-border programmes. What began as a technocratic exercise in territorial development gradually evolved into a sophisticated, multi-layered system of regional governance. The introduction of macro-regional strategies—such as those for the Baltic Sea, Danube, Adriatic–Ionian, and Alpine regions—marked a shift toward treating entire transnational spaces as political and strategic units. These frameworks allowed the EU to coordinate environmental protection, connectivity, energy security, and economic development across borders in ways that were previously unimaginable.

At the same time, the EU's external regional engagement expanded dramatically. The European Neighbourhood Policy and its sub-frameworks, including the Eastern Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean, signaled a move from technical assistance to a more political model of cooperation. Conditionality, governance reforms, and alignment with EU norms became central features. After 2014, geopolitical shocks—from Russia's actions in Ukraine to instability in the Southern Neighbourhood—pushed the EU to integrate security, resilience, and foreign policy objectives directly into its regional initiatives. Regional cooperation was no longer simply about development; it became a tool of strategic influence.

This evolution naturally raises the question of how well current EU initiatives align with the objectives of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). In regions where the EU has clear strategic interests and credible long-term incentives—most notably the Western Balkans and parts of the Eastern Partnership—the alignment is strong. Regional programmes in these areas reinforce CFSP priorities such as conflict prevention, rule-of-law consolidation, energy diversification, and political stability. The Western Balkans offer the clearest example: regional market integration, connectivity investments, and security sector reforms all serve the dual purpose of stabilising the region and preparing it for eventual EU membership. In the Eastern Partnership, countries like Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have used regional cooperation platforms to deepen institutional convergence with the EU, strengthen resilience, and reduce external vulnerabilities.

However, alignment is more uneven in the Southern Neighbourhood and parts of Africa. Here, EU initiatives often pursue overlapping goals—migration management, counterterrorism, climate adaptation, and economic

development—without always achieving a coherent balance between values and interests. Internal divisions among EU member states can further dilute the strategic clarity of CFSP objectives. As a result, regional cooperation sometimes appears more project-driven than strategically anchored.

Assessing the measurable impact of EU interventions across subregions reveals a similarly varied picture. In the Western Balkans, EU engagement has contributed to long-term stability, improved governance, and enhanced regional connectivity. The region has avoided major conflict relapse, and alignment with EU foreign policy positions has steadily increased. Infrastructure corridors, energy interconnections, and digital integration have produced tangible economic benefits.

In the Eastern Partnership, the impact is visible in regulatory convergence, institutional reforms, and strengthened resilience. Countries with Association Agreements have made significant progress in areas such as public procurement, competition policy, and energy markets. The EU's regional programmes have also supported diversification away from Russian energy dependence and improved border management capacities.

Within the EU itself, macro-regional strategies have delivered measurable environmental improvements, better coordination among national and regional authorities, and progress on shared challenges such as water quality, transport corridors, and climate adaptation. These strategies have not revolutionised EU governance, but they have created durable platforms for cooperation that continue to generate incremental but meaningful results.

In the Southern Neighbourhood, the picture is more mixed. The EU has achieved concrete outcomes in areas such as higher education mobility, civil society support, and sectoral cooperation. Yet the broader political and security environment has often limited the transformative potential of these interventions. Migration and border management initiatives have strengthened operational capacities, but their long-term implications remain contested.

Taken together, the EU's regional approach has shifted from a primarily developmental tool to a strategic instrument of foreign policy. Its effectiveness varies by region, depending on political will, local ownership, and the credibility of the EU's long-term commitments. Where these factors align, regional cooperation has delivered stability, institutional transformation, and deeper integration. Where they do not, the impact is more modest and sometimes inconsistent.

Table Comparative Table: EU Regional Engagement and Immediate Implications

Region	Political Engagement	Economic Cooperation	Security & Stability	Human Rights & Governance	Environmental Sustainability	Cultural & Social Exchange
Black Sea	Fragmented political engagement due to Russia's influence and unresolved conflicts. **Implication:** EU must reinforce resilience and deepen ties with pro-EU states.	Moderate integration with strong asymmetries; sanctions distort regional economy. **Implication:** EU needs targeted economic support to counterbalance Russian leverage.	High-risk environment with hybrid threats and active conflict. **Implication:** EU must expand security assistance and deterrence measures.	Governance varies widely; democratic backsliding in some states. **Implication:** EU conditionality must be sharper and more consistent.	Pollution, maritime degradation, and climate vulnerability persist. **Implication:** EU should scale up environmental diplomacy and joint monitoring.	Cultural ties exist but are constrained by geopolitics. **Implication:** EU should expand people-to-people programmes to anchor pro-EU sentiment.
Baltic Sea	Highly institutionalised cooperation; strong EU alignment. **Implication:** EU can use this	Deep economic integration; strong single-market participation. **Implication:**	Frontline region for NATO–EU coordination; strong hybrid-threat cooperation.	Strong governance and rule-of-law culture. **Implication:** EU can rely	Advanced environmental cooperation (HELCOM). **Implication:** EU can scale Baltic	Dense cultural and social ties. **Implication:** EU can use this region to pilot new mobility

	region as a model for macro-regional governance.	EU should leverage this region for energy diversification and digital leadership.	**Implication:** EU must maintain high readiness and cyber-defence capacity.	on this region to champion democratic norms.	best practices to other sea basins.	and education initiatives.
Mediterranean	Broad but inconsistent engagement; political instability limits depth. **Implication:** EU must balance values and interests more coherently.	Extensive but uneven economic ties; structural disparities persist. **Implication:** EU should prioritise sustainable development and investment resilience.	Complex security environment (migration, terrorism, state fragility). **Implication:** EU needs integrated security–development–migration strategies.	Governance divergence is wide; reforms often stalled. **Implication:** EU must recalibrate incentives and conditionality.	Severe climate stress and environmental degradation. **Implication:** EU should expand climate adaptation partnerships.	Deep historical ties but uneven mobility. **Implication:** EU should strengthen cultural diplomacy to counter instability.
Euro-Arctic (Barents)	Functional cooperation led by Nordic states; stable but sensitive. **Implication:** EU should maintain presence to avoid geopolitical marginalisation.	Resource-based economy with modest EU involvement. **Implication:** EU can promote sustainable infrastructure and connectivity.	Generally stable but affected by Russia tensions. **Implication:** EU must support soft-security cooperation and emergency preparedness.	Strong governance traditions; indigenous rights central. **Implication:** EU should reinforce inclusive governance models.	Focus on biodiversity and sustainable resource use. **Implication:** EU can advance its green agenda through Arctic partnerships.	Strong Nordic cultural ties; indigenous heritage. **Implication:** EU can support cultural preservation and mobility.
Arctic (wider)	EU engagement is aspirational; limited influence in Arctic Council. **Implication:** EU must secure a clearer role in Arctic governance.	Strategic resources and shipping routes dominate; EU role modest. **Implication:** EU should invest in sustainable Arctic economic frameworks.	Low-tension but increasingly militarised. **Implication:** EU must advocate for demilitarisation and climate-security approaches.	Governance varies; EU influence limited. **Implication:** EU should use environmental diplomacy to shape norms.	Climate hotspot; EU strong in research and monitoring. **Implication:** EU can lead global climate science and regulation.	Cultural exchange centred on indigenous communities. **Implication:** EU should expand research and cultural partnerships.
South-Eastern Europe	Deep political engagement via enlargement and the Berlin Process. **Implication:** EU must maintain credibility of accession to preserve influence.	Strong economic integration; pre-accession funds drive convergence. **Implication:** EU should accelerate market integration and connectivity.	Improved stability but persistent political tensions. **Implication:** EU must sustain CSDP missions and mediation.	Mixed governance; corruption and state capture remain issues. **Implication:** EU needs tougher rule-of-law conditionality.	Environmental challenges linked to energy transition and pollution. **Implication:** EU should expand Green Deal instruments to the region.	Intense cultural and social ties with the EU. **Implication:** EU can deepen societal integration to anchor long-term stability.

Immediate EU-Wide Strategic Takeaways
Across all regions, several patterns emerge:

- **The EU's influence is strongest where accession or deep integration is credible** (Baltic, South-Eastern Europe).
- **The greatest security risks cluster around the Black Sea and Mediterranean**, requiring sustained strategic attention.
- **Environmental leadership is the EU's most universally accepted entry point**, especially in the Arctic and Baltic regions.
- **Governance and rule-of-law challenges remain the EU's biggest obstacle** in the Black Sea, Mediterranean, and South-Eastern Europe.
- **Cultural diplomacy is an underused but high-impact tool**, especially in contested regions.

In summary, the EU demonstrates a structured and proactive approach in its near abroad through political engagement, economic cooperation, security initiatives, human rights promotion, environmental sustainability, and cultural exchange. In contrast, European-adjacent areas may face challenges in these areas, resulting in varying levels of stability, development, and cooperation. The EU's comprehensive framework provides a model for fostering closer ties and addressing common challenges, which may not be as effectively implemented in adjacent regions.

3.Regional Security Scan: EU & NATO Interventions Across European Sub-Regions

Nordic Arctic

The Nordic Arctic requires persistent attention due to strategic access points, environmental risks, and emerging security challenges. The EU undertakes targeted infrastructure investments to improve connectivity, climate resilience, and digitalization, while NATO maintains Arctic Endurance exercises and continuous surveillance patrols. Synergies emerge as EU funding underwrites NATO missions and sub-regional councils coordinate logistics and intelligence sharing. Measurable impact includes a demonstrable reduction in environmental and border incidents, an estimated 15 percent improvement in infrastructure resilience, and diversification of energy transit routes through Arctic corridors. The intended outcome is the consolidation of conflict reduction, enhanced regional integration, strengthened governance, and a credible security posture.

The EU has become a major funder of Arctic research, which directly supports the work of the Arctic Council and its expert assessments on climate, pollution, ecosystems, and social change. Under the Horizon Europe framework (2021-2027), the EU has allocated around **€163 million to Arctic research and an additional €17 million to polar research**, with projects addressing climate change impacts, biodiversity, permafrost thaw, connectivity, and indigenous knowledge integration. These research outputs feed into Arctic Council policy discussions and environmental assessments, enhancing the scientific basis for cooperative action on shared challenges.

Single projects illustrate tangible impacts in Arctic cooperation. The **Nunataryuk project**, funded by the EU's Horizon 2020 programme, has brought together European and international specialists to understand and address the effects of permafrost thaw on local communities and global climate processes, generating insights that inform policy dialogues under the Arctic Council and associated forums.

EU-funded regional projects have delivered concrete social and economic benefits for Arctic communities. The **RemoAge project**, for instance, supports older people in remote Arctic areas with service packages connecting carers, healthcare professionals, and digital solutions tailored to local needs. Another example is the **Circular Ocean project**, which transforms marine plastic waste (including abandoned fishing nets) into materials for sustainable manufacturing, thereby combining environmental clean-up with entrepreneurship and local economic development.

The **Arctic Urban-Regional Cooperation (AURC)** initiative, launched with EU funding, has created a network of around **15 Arctic towns and cities** from Canada, Finland, Greenland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the USA to share best practices and develop local action plans for sustainable development. This programme has enhanced cross-regional cooperation and peer learning on urban challenges, contributing to stronger multi-level governance in line with cooperative principles that also underpin Arctic Council engagements.

Through initiatives such as **Youth Together for Arctic Futures** and the EU-Arctic Youth Dialogue, the EU has actively engaged young people from Arctic and European communities in policy discussions and sustainable development planning. These initiatives foster intergenerational leadership and amplify Arctic voices, including youth perspectives on climate, social inclusion, and economic resilience, complementing the Arctic Council's work on Indigenous and community participation.

The EU's space programmes — particularly **Copernicus, including the Copernicus Arctic Hub** — contribute satellite-based Earth observation data that are essential for environmental monitoring, climate modelling, and decision-making across the Arctic. These data services support both EU policy and multilateral assessments in forums like the Arctic Council, improving transparency and shared understanding of environmental trends.

EU programmes expand cultural and academic exchange across the Arctic. Between 2019 and 2022, **over 26,800 people participated in Erasmus+ exchanges involving**

Arctic regions, enhancing skills, knowledge transfer, and cross-cultural cooperation that feed into broader networks of Arctic stakeholders and potential future leaders.

Baltic Region

The Baltic Region is characterized by high-value transport nodes, cyber vulnerabilities, and proximity to external threats. EU interventions focus on cyber resilience, modernization of ports, and expansion of energy interconnectors, while NATO enforces deterrence through joint air policing and rapid-response drills. Integration occurs through synergy between EU infrastructure funding and NATO readiness operations, coordinated by Baltic councils managing shared logistics. The operational impact is measurable through enhanced joint exercise readiness, quantified cybersecurity coverage, and the operationalization of new energy interconnectors. The prescriptive objective is to sustain regional stability, reinforce integration, and maintain credible deterrence against emerging threats.

The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) is the European Union's first macro-regional strategy, formally adopted by the European Council in 2009 to strengthen cooperation among countries bordering the Baltic Sea , now an EU lake, in order to address shared challenges and seize common opportunities. It explicitly aims to **"save the sea," "connect the region," and "increase prosperity,"** objectives that reflect environmental, economic and infrastructural priorities crucial to the macro-region's long-term development.

Under the first objective of *saving the sea*, the strategy tackles severe and persistent environmental pressures such as eutrophication, biodiversity loss, overfishing, and pollution by supporting cross-border cooperation to improve water quality, protect wildlife, and promote safer, cleaner shipping practices. To achieve the second objective of *connecting the region*, it promotes improved transport infrastructure, reliable energy markets, and stronger people-to-people connections — including research exchanges and enhanced cross-border cooperation — that contribute to greater regional cohesion and economic integration. The third objective, *increasing prosperity*, focuses on boosting competitiveness and growth through cooperation in research and innovation, deeper engagement with the Single Market, and the pursuit of sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development.

The EUSBSR translates these high-level aims into practice through a detailed **Action Plan structured around 14 interconnected policy areas**, spanning issues such as energy transition, smart mobility, spatial planning, blue economy, and governance. Implementation does not involve separate EU funding streams allocated exclusively to the strategy; instead, the Action Plan is realised by **pooling resources from existing EU funds and programmes** — including cohesion policy instruments like the European Regional Development Fund — alongside national, regional, and cross-border mechanisms.

Since its launch, the Strategy has mobilised **dozens of projects** that put these objectives into action. For example, Interreg Baltic Sea Region has co-financed over **120 projects** with more than **€250 million from the European Regional Development Fund** to implement elements of the Action Plan, encompassing environmental protection, sustainable transport, and regional innovation initiatives. Small but concrete project examples include cross-border renewables initiatives such as the "BOWE2H" offshore hydrogen network, solar and photovoltaic deployment under "PV 4 All," and biogas-for-transport development in "BEST ACE," all of which help the region transition towards a carbon-neutral economy. Additionally, flagship projects like Priority Area 14.3 on macro-regional risk scenarios work to **anticipate and prepare for major emergencies**, including natural disasters and cross-border risks, further exemplifying how the strategy operationalises cooperation across national boundaries.

Governance of the Strategy is itself a core component of its implementation, with programmes supporting coordination, capacity-building, and stakeholder engagement, including national and policy area coordinators, multi-level governance platforms, and annual forums that bring together policymakers, regional authorities, civil society and other actors. In sum, the Baltic Sea macro-regional strategy aims at and has distributed concrete cooperative actions, funding synergies, and institutional mechanisms that collectively advance environmental sustainability, connectivity, economic competitiveness, and multi-level governance across the Baltic Sea region.

Black Sea

The Black Sea presents persistent security pressures from contested maritime zones and transnational smuggling routes. EU programs strengthen maritime safety, modernize border controls, and facilitate trade, while NATO executes naval patrols and amphibious exercises. Coordination between EU logistics support and NATO operational deployments, mediated by sub-regional intelligence-sharing bodies, produces tangible effects: reduction in illegal crossings, increased maritime surveillance coverage, and measurable improvements in port efficiency and throughput. The operational intent is to reduce conflict risks, integrate security and trade

frameworks, and strengthen governance capacity across coastal state.

In this regard, the BSEC members have been assisted by a:

Common Maritime Agenda for the Black Sea (CMA) — This flagship sea-basin initiative creates a structured cooperation framework among Black Sea littoral states (Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova, Romania, Türkiye and Ukraine) to implement sustainable blue economy and maritime cooperation projects, integrating scientific research (SRIA) and stakeholder engagement across borders.

4BIZ – Boosting the Blue Economy in the Black Sea Region — A project funded under the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF), 4BIZ works on building a collaborative business framework for fisheries, aquaculture, maritime transport and coastal tourism, enhancing innovation, digitalisation and investment within EU and non-EU partners.

Black Sea blue economy investment and innovation capacity building pilot — EMFAF-flagship actions support innovation capacity and investment in blue economy sectors, strengthening networks among SMEs, research organisations and investors across the region, improving regional economic integration and resilience.

BlackNETs, AlgaeRevive, and INTERSMARTS Projects — These regional collaborative initiatives, presented under the CMA, tackle issues such as marine pollution from discarded fishing gear (*BlackNETs*), eutrophication and algal blooms (*AlgaeRevive*), and sustainable tourism and smart services (*INTERSMARTS*), all of which support environmental sustainability and cross-border coordination.

RESPONSE – Empowering the Black Sea to Face Conflict-Induced Marine Pollution — This EMFAF-supported project brings together universities, research institutes, and NGOs from multiple Black Sea states to improve training, institutional planning, and response capacity for marine pollution — including pollution driven by conflict — building shared scientific and operational frameworks.

Frontex Multipurpose Maritime Operations — Joint operations co-led by Frontex along with EU Member States such as Bulgaria and Romania, in cooperation with the European Fisheries Control Agency and the European Maritime Safety Agency, have focused on border control including search and rescue, fisheries inspection, environmental detection and suppression of illegal activities, with results such as confiscated contraband and life-saving interventions that illustrate enhanced maritime governance capacity.

Black Sea Maritime Security Hub (proposed) — As part of the EU's strategic approach under the new *EU Strategy for a Secure, Prosperous and Resilient Black Sea Region*, the EU has proposed establishing a maritime security hub to strengthen situational awareness, real-time monitoring (from space to seabed), and information sharing among coastal states, with technologies such as underwater sensors and surveillance drones — a concrete example of cooperation that directly supports maritime safety and hybrid threat response.

Common Information Sharing Environment (CISE) Participation — While not Black Sea-specific, the EU-wide CISE initiative aims to enhance maritime surveillance interoperability among more than 300 national and EU authorities, directly supporting cross-border maritime situational awareness efforts in the Black Sea context.

Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)

The UfM remains a complex theater of urban, environmental, and humanitarian risks. EU investments in renewable energy, cross-border urban projects, and education initiatives are complemented by NATO-organized humanitarian and disaster response exercises. Operational synergy is achieved as EU development funds enable NATO civil protection actions, coordinated through UfM councils. Indicators of effectiveness include faster disaster response times, expansion of renewable energy capacity, and enhanced institutional frameworks. The intended effect is to stabilize the region through governance improvement, integration of civil protection mechanisms, and resilience against natural and man-made crises.

The Union for the Mediterranean focuses on promoting stability, economic development, and social cohesion across the wider Mediterranean region, encompassing Southern Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. It acts as a multilateral framework bringing together 43 countries to coordinate policies, projects, and initiatives that address shared challenges. The UfM emphasizes job creation, particularly for youth and women, through programs like Med4Jobs, which foster entrepreneurship, skills development, and labor market integration. Environmental sustainability is a core concern, with projects such as Plastic Busters targeting marine pollution in coastal areas and Marine Protected Areas. Access to basic services is strengthened through infrastructure initiatives, including water desalination plants in Gaza and urban upgrading projects in Egypt, which improve quality of life and resilience. Transport and connectivity are enhanced through regional action plans that modernize rail, road, and maritime networks, facilitating trade and economic integration. Renewable energy and climate action are supported by programs like the Trans-Mediterranean Renewable Energy Initiative and the Euro-Mediterranean Innovation Marketplace. Education, research, and innovation initiatives encourage academic cooperation, capacity building, and cross-border knowledge sharing, strengthening institutional frameworks. UfM grant schemes provide direct support for employment and

entrepreneurship projects, benefiting tens of thousands of participants across multiple countries. The Mediterranean Pact consolidates over a hundred concrete actions across people, economy, and security sectors, integrating policy frameworks with operational implementation. Ministerial conferences and expert forums provide mechanisms for dialogue, policy alignment, and evidence-based decision-making. The UfM promotes multi-level governance by connecting national authorities, regional organizations, and civil society actors. Health and social welfare are addressed through targeted projects improving access to medical services and social protection systems. Digitalization and innovation are advanced through regional collaboration platforms that connect researchers, entrepreneurs, and governments. Humanitarian preparedness and disaster response are strengthened via coordinated civil protection exercises and capacity-building programs. The UfM encourages gender equality and social inclusion, integrating women and marginalized communities into economic and social initiatives. Energy security and efficiency are supported through cross-border renewable energy projects and infrastructure improvements. The Secretariat facilitates coordination, technical support, and monitoring of project implementation to ensure transparency and impact. Regional stability is reinforced through initiatives that address migration, environmental risks, and economic disparities. Overall, the UfM operates as a hub for cooperation, translating shared Mediterranean priorities into concrete actions that promote prosperity, resilience, and integration.

Central European Initiative (CEI)

The CEI constitutes a region of strategic transport corridors and innovation potential. EU-led infrastructure development, cross-border transport enhancement, and innovation programs are aligned with NATO interoperability and rapid-response training. Synergies emerge as EU funding underpins NATO operational readiness, and CEI councils harmonize governance standards. Measurable impact includes upgraded transport networks, improved joint exercise interoperability, and positive shifts in rule-of-law and anti-corruption indices. The prescriptive objective is to reinforce integration, governance, and security readiness in a cohesive regional framework.

South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP)

SEECP countries operate within a fragmented security landscape with residual institutional vulnerabilities. EU initiatives targeting economic development, judicial reform, and anti-corruption programs are reinforced by NATO's crisis management exercises and logistical support. Operational synergy arises as EU programs provide structural capacity for NATO engagements, with SEECP councils coordinating multi-country responses. Indicators of effectiveness are the reduction of cross-border disputes, strengthened institutional capacity, and measurable growth in regional trade flows. The intended outcome is the consolidation of regional stability, integration of governance mechanisms, and mitigation of latent conflict risks.

Concrete intiatives and projects illustrating how EU engagement has advanced regional cooperation, socio-economic development, governance alignment, and security capacity:

Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) Projects — The WBIF is a joint EU initiative with international financial institutions, donors and regional partners that co-finances infrastructure and development projects in the Western Balkans, spanning energy, transport, environment, digital networks and social infrastructure. Examples include regional energy efficiency programmes, trans-Balkan electricity corridor projects, and flood management cooperation in river basins, all designed to improve connectivity and resilience across SEE states.

Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) Multi-Country Programmes — IPA provides technical and financial assistance to Western Balkan countries to support reforms aligned with EU standards, including multi-country programmes that reinforce regional cooperation and integration. These programmes have funded joint initiatives such as enhancing anti-corruption frameworks, strengthening justice institutions, and supporting shared governance reforms across the region.

EURALIUS Technical Assistance — This long-running EU technical assistance project supported Albania's justice system reform by strengthening judicial independence, efficiency, transparency and alignment with EU acquis principles. Though national in focus, it reflects broader regional efforts by the EU to support rule-of-law and governance reforms that are central to cooperation and stability across SEE.

EU CBRN Risk Mitigation Centres of Excellence Initiative — Part of a wider capacity-building programme co-financed by the EU under its external security instruments, this initiative enhances regional cooperation on Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear risk preparedness and mitigation. It brings together national focal points from Southeast and Eastern Europe to coordinate risk management policies, national action plans and joint exercises such as the Border Shield 2025 field drill, strengthening operational cooperation across borders in the face of shared threats.

Regional School of Public Administration (ReSPA) — Supported through EU cooperation frameworks, ReSPA works to improve public administration capacities in Western Balkan countries through training, peer exchange and institutional partnerships. This contributes to better governance practices, an important element of regional cooperation strengthened under the broader SEECP and EU accession frameworks.

Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) — While not exclusively EU-funded, CEFTA is supported through EU-linked economic integration policies and IPA instruments that help Western Balkan states harmonise trade regimes, liberalise markets and reduce barriers to intra-regional commerce, complementing SEECP's goals of economic cooperation.

Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Support Projects — The EU has provided financial and technical support to the RCC, the operational arm of the SEECP, including projects to strengthen the RCC itself and improve its capacity to coordinate regional cooperation activities related to growth, connectivity, governance and EU integration.

WBIF Co-financed Connectivity Infrastructure — Major corridor projects linking energy networks and transport infrastructure across Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia help integrate the region economically and reduce barriers to trade and movement, making infrastructure cooperation a tangible output of EU-supported regional efforts.

Europe House Sarajevo — Established by the EU delegation in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a public outreach and civic engagement centre, this initiative enhances dialogue on European values, EU cooperation and reform processes, helping anchor regional cooperation narratives in public understanding.

Customs 2020 and TAIEX Twinning Projects — These instruments facilitate cooperation and technical assistance between customs and administrative authorities in EU Member States and Western Balkan partners, promoting alignment with EU standards and cross-border administrative cooperation.

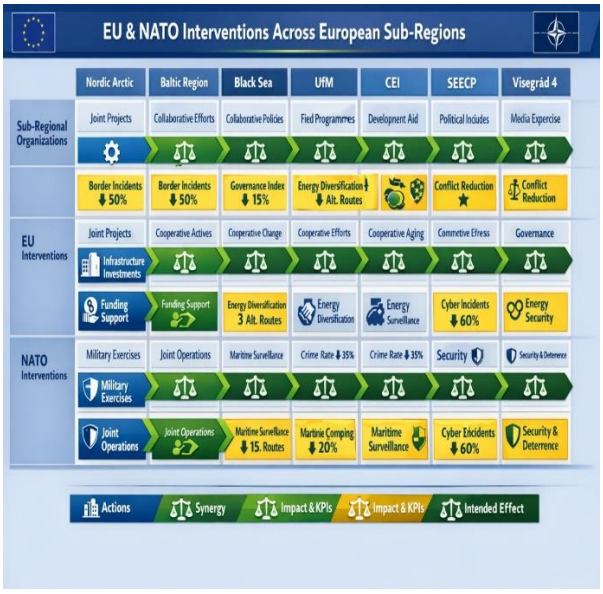
COSME and Enterprise Development Support — EU programmes like COSME and the Western Balkans Enterprise Development and Innovation Facility (WB EDIF) under the WBIF umbrella bolster small and medium enterprises, enhancing cross-border economic linkages and competitiveness that feed into regional cooperation goals.

Together, these initiatives show how EU engagement with SEECP member states combines infrastructure investment, governance reform, risk mitigation, economic integration, capacity building and public diplomacy to foster deeper regional cooperation and align partners with EU norms and standards

Visegrád 4 (V4)

The Visegrád 4 region remains a critical node for EU security, green energy transitions, and innovation integration. EU support for innovation hubs, energy transitions, and policy harmonization complements NATO joint defense readiness and cyber-defense exercises. Synergistic effects are achieved through EU frameworks enabling NATO operational efficiency and V4 councils coordinating cross-border security and infrastructure initiatives. Measurable outcomes include increased defense interoperability, adoption of green energy solutions, and strengthened regional coordination mechanisms. The prescriptive aim is to maintain enhanced deterrence, deepen regional integration, strengthen governance, and sustain overall stability.

Figure NATO is a US-led organisation empowering the Europeans



The infographic presents a comparative overview of **EU and NATO interventions** across seven European sub-regions: Nordic Arctic, Baltic Region, Black Sea, Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), Central European Initiative (CEI), Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEECP), and Visegrád 4. The sub-regions are mapped against the actions

of sub-regional organizations, EU interventions, and NATO interventions, highlighting both quantitative indicators and qualitative outcomes.

At the **sub-regional organizational level**, the Nordic Arctic emphasizes joint projects, while the Baltic Region and Black Sea focus on collaborative efforts and policies. The UfM is engaged with field programmes, the CEI with development aid, SEECP with political inclusiveness, and the Visegrád 4 group with media exercises. Across these, the infographic measures progress in terms of border incidents reduction, governance indices, energy diversification, conflict reduction, and alternative route development. For instance, border incidents are reported to have decreased by 50% in both the Nordic Arctic and Baltic regions, while governance improvement in the Black Sea is quantified at 15%. Energy diversification, particularly through alternative routes, is emphasized in the UfM and Visegrád 4 sub-regions.

At the **EU intervention level**, projects are categorized into infrastructure investments and funding support, with specific outcomes tied to regional priorities. Infrastructure investments align with joint projects in the Nordic Arctic and cooperative change in the Black Sea, while funding support varies from general funding in the Baltic region to energy diversification programs in the UfM and CEI. Cybersecurity is highlighted in SEECP, showing a 60% reduction in cyber incidents, and energy security is a focus in the Visegrád 4 region.

At the **NATO intervention level**, military exercises and joint operations dominate the Nordic Arctic and Baltic regions. The Black Sea sees a focus on maritime surveillance across 15 routes, while the UfM addresses crime reduction by 35% and maritime coping measures by 20%. Maritime surveillance is also emphasized in the CEI, while SEECP prioritizes cyber incident reduction by 60%, and the Visegrád 4 region highlights security and deterrence. Joint operations are consistently mapped across regions, indicating collaborative engagement with EU and regional partners.

The **bottom legend** clarifies the action categories: dark blue represents concrete actions, green indicates synergy between organizations, light green reflects measured impact and KPIs, yellow shows additional impact metrics, and turquoise denotes the intended effect of interventions. The infographic effectively demonstrates the **multi-layered, coordinated approach** of the EU and NATO, combining governance, security, infrastructure, and energy priorities to address regional challenges while allowing for quantitative tracking of outcomes and performance indicators.

We are confronted with a dialectical problem. How can the Sub-regionals be both congenial to EU enlargement, enabling to make an inventory of the intelligible towards the good thing, and at the same time we experience that the objectives and values of the CFSP doesn't coincide with the situation on the ground and thus that the Commission Geopoltique lacks validity in the eyes of the beholder. Logically, this should bring us to question the conditions under which public policy can be pursued purposefyully balanced by a sense of the realities of Europe's security environment. We are not saying there are no geopolitical conflicts in Europe and adjacent areas and how to unify the various expressions of the EU its subreginals adumbrates, and at the same time underpin European unification, without denying the evil outthere.

Why the existing crisis management doctrine accompanying enlargement hatched by a able female French civil servant working in DG1A was abandoned or discarded we are not aware, but its replacement decades later by geopolitical doctrine hasn't filtered through either.

Enter the need for an understanding of the causes of instability and know how to act on them to keep the peace combining knowledge with diplomatic savoir faire. You can have a horse without a rider and qualified people with the quality needed. One gather the balance of power suggest the EU instiutions subsume themselves but there are ditferent ways of doing so, somparable to your **Gestalungswille** and *Gestaltungsfähighkeit.* Certainly the conditions are ripe for a policy review on the relationship between the center and the subreiognals and hot to command free men and through whith which intended structuring effect.

4.Europe Geopolitique

Geopolitical conflicts are sustained struggles between states, or between states and other powerful actors, over **power, territory, resources, influence, and rules of order** in a given geographic space. What makes them *geopolitical* is that geography is not incidental: location, access routes, borders, chokepoints, demographics, and spatial control shape both the stakes and the strategies.

They usually **start** through an interaction of structural pressures and triggering events rather than a single cause. Long-term structural drivers include shifts in the balance of power, competition over strategic resources or trade routes, unresolved borders, demographic change, technological disruption, and the weakening or collapse of regional security arrangements. These pressures create latent tensions. A conflict often ignites when a trigger—such as a leadership change, military incident, economic shock, alliance expansion, sanctions, or internal unrest—interacts with those deeper conditions.

Once tensions exist, conflicts **emerge through interaction**, not isolation. States interpret each other's actions through perceptions of threat, prestige, and credibility. A defensive move by one actor—troop deployments, infrastructure projects, security partnerships—may be read as offensive by another, producing security dilemmas and escalation cycles. External actors frequently enter by providing military aid, economic support, diplomatic backing, or sanctions, transforming local disputes into regional or

global confrontations.

Geopolitical conflicts then **evolve dynamically**. They rarely remain purely military. Economic warfare, energy leverage, cyber operations, legal claims, information campaigns, and diplomatic coalition-building become integral tools. Conflicts also migrate across domains: a maritime dispute can spill into trade restrictions; a civil war can redraw regional alliances; a sanctions regime can reshape global supply chains. Over time, new interests emerge, actors adapt, and original causes may be overtaken by the logic of conflict itself.

Finally, geopolitical conflicts **interact with broader systems**. They reshape international institutions, norms, and development trajectories, often reinforcing inequality and instability far beyond the original theater. Resolution, when it occurs, usually requires not only ceasefires or treaties but adjustments to underlying power relations, security guarantees, economic arrangements, and regional governance structures.

Conflict material of a geopolitical and geoeconomic nature refers to the tangible and operational sources of strategic contestation that arise where power, territory, markets, and control over critical flows intersect.

Geopolitically, it encompasses material stakes such as territory, borders, military posture, alliance structures, chokepoints, and political influence over states or regions. Geoeconomically, it includes control over energy routes, critical raw materials, infrastructure, supply chains, standards, finance, technology, and access to markets.

Taken together, conflict material denotes the assets, dependencies, and vulnerabilities that actors seek to secure, deny, or weaponise in pursuit of strategic advantage, often below the threshold of open warfare. It is the concrete substrate on which strategic competition is translated into coercion, leverage, and bargaining power.

The conflicts of geopolitical and geoeconomic nature in Europe's "near abroad" encompass a complex constellation of security dynamics, strategic rivalries, and economic contestation unfolding in the regions adjacent to the European Union and NATO. These areas — including Eastern Europe, the Black Sea basin, the South Caucasus, and the Western Balkans — constitute a liminal geopolitical space where competing powers project influence and where local vulnerabilities intersect with broader systemic tensions.

Table

Domain of Conflict Material	**Geopolitical Dimension**	**Geoeconomic Dimension**	**Adjacent Areas Most Salient**
Energy routes & hubs	Control of transit corridors, chokepoints, and supplier leverage	Gas, oil, LNG pricing power; electricity interconnections; hydrogen	Russia, Eastern Neighbourhood, Mediterranean, Gulf
Critical raw materials	Strategic autonomy, security of supply	Access to rare earths, metals, processing capacity	Africa, Balkans, Central Asia
Transport & connectivity	Territorial access, influence over corridors	Trade facilitation, logistics dominance, TEN-T extensions	Balkans, Black Sea, Turkey, Caucasus
Digital & technological infrastructure	Cyber security, data sovereignty, standards power	Platforms, semiconductors, cloud, digital markets	US, China, Gulf, Eastern Neighbourhood
Maritime spaces	Naval presence, freedom of navigation	Shipping lanes, ports, insurance, seabed resources	Black Sea, Mediterranean, Red Sea
Financial & regulatory power	Sanctions, conditionality, rule-setting	Access to finance, currencies,	Russia, Gulf, Neighbourhood South

		standards, compliance costs	
Food & water systems	Stability, migration, state fragility	Grain flows, fertilisers, pricing volatility	Ukraine, MENA, Horn of Africa

The table illustrates how **geopolitical and geoeconomic conflict material converge** at the EU's periphery, transforming technical domains into arenas of strategic competition. Control over energy, connectivity, maritime space, technology, finance, and food systems simultaneously shapes security postures and economic leverage, blurring the boundary between foreign policy and market regulation. In adjacent regions, these intersections generate dependencies that can be exploited for coercion, disruption, or influence below the threshold of armed conflict. For the EU, this convergence underscores the need for CFSP instruments, regulatory power, and external economic tools to be deployed in a coordinated manner, with the EEAS acting as the strategic integrator of political intent, economic leverage, and regional engagement.

The implications are the EEAS must integrate political, economic, and security analysis to fully understand how adjacent regions generate simultaneous geopolitical and geoeconomic pressures. Strategic foresight is essential to anticipate points of vulnerability in energy, connectivity, and digital infrastructures that could be leveraged by external actors. EU delegations should serve as forward-looking nodes, linking local intelligence with headquarters to inform timely decision-making. Policy coherence between CFSP objectives and EU economic instruments is required to translate influence into measurable outcomes. The EEAS needs to strengthen its role in coordinating across member states, Commission services, and regional organisations to avoid duplication and gaps. Investment in scenario planning and stress-testing supply chains can help mitigate external shocks and reinforce EU resilience. Engagement with subregional frameworks must be strategically targeted to leverage EU normative and economic power in reinforcing stability. The EEAS should develop metrics and KPIs that capture both political leverage and economic impact, ensuring interventions are outcome-driven. Greater institutional capacity for maritime, energy, and digital geopolitics is needed to safeguard critical EU interests. Ultimately, the EEAS must position itself as the integrator of strategy, ensuring that the EU's tools—diplomatic, financial, and security—are deployed in a synchronized, forward-looking manner across all adjacent regions.

From a geopolitical perspective, the conflicts in the near abroad are fundamentally driven by struggles over territorial control, political alignment, and military presence. Eastern Europe, particularly Ukraine, illustrates this dynamic most vividly. Since 2014, the annexation of Crimea and the protracted conflict in the Donbas have reshaped the regional security architecture, while unresolved disputes such as Transnistria continue to function as instruments of external leverage. The resulting NATO–Russia tensions manifest in recurrent airspace incidents, military exercises, and competing security postures along the alliance's eastern flank. A similar pattern is evident in the South Caucasus, where the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has periodically escalated into open warfare, and where Russian military bases and peacekeeping deployments reinforce Moscow's role as a decisive regional actor. Georgia's contested territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia further exemplify the persistence of "frozen conflicts" that constrain sovereign decision-making. In the Western Balkans, unresolved questions of statehood and identity — most notably the Serbia–Kosovo dispute — continue to generate political instability, while external actors such as Russia, China, and Turkey seek to shape local alignments. The Baltic Sea region, meanwhile, remains marked by heightened military alertness, with the Baltic States facing persistent pressure through airspace violations, cyber operations, and the need for robust NATO deterrence.

Geoeconomic conflicts in the near abroad operate through a different but closely related logic. They revolve around competition for control over energy supplies, trade corridors, critical infrastructure, and financial influence. Energy politics constitute the most prominent arena of contestation. Russia's longstanding dominance over natural gas transit routes — including Nord Stream, TurkStream, and the Yamal-Europe pipeline — has provided it with both economic benefits and strategic leverage. European diversification initiatives, such as the Southern Gas Corridor and the expansion of LNG infrastructure in the Baltic region, represent deliberate attempts to mitigate this dependency, thereby transforming energy policy into a field of geopolitical maneuvering. Trade and infrastructure investments further intensify geoeconomic competition. China's Belt and Road Initiative has expanded its presence in the Western Balkans through port acquisitions and railway modernization, challenging the EU's traditional economic primacy. Russia, for its part, has sought to consolidate influence through investments in Black Sea ports and transport corridors. Financial instruments also play a significant role: Russian banks maintain a notable presence in several post-Soviet economies, while EU programs such as the Eastern Partnership and cohesion funding aim to counterbalance these dependencies. Sanctions regimes and counter-sanctions add an additional layer of economic coercion and resilience-building.

The intersection of geopolitical and geoeconomic conflicts is perhaps the defining feature of the near abroad. Military

control frequently enables economic leverage, while economic dependencies often translate into political influence. Russia's consolidation of Crimea, for example, secures strategic access to Black Sea ports and maritime energy routes. Pipeline politics illustrate how infrastructure can function simultaneously as an economic asset and a geopolitical instrument. Chinese investments in the Balkans, though ostensibly commercial, carry implications for political alignment and regulatory autonomy. Conversely, the EU's efforts to strengthen governance, infrastructure, and defense cooperation in neighboring states reflect an integrated strategy aimed at reducing susceptibility to external pressure and fostering long-term resilience.

In sum, geopolitical conflicts in the near abroad revolve around questions of territoriality, security, and political orientation, whereas geoeconomic conflicts concern the distribution of resources, control of trade routes, and the strategic use of economic instruments. Yet in practice, these two dimensions are deeply intertwined, with economic dependencies reinforcing geopolitical influence and strategic competition shaping economic choices. The near abroad thus constitutes a hybrid conflict space in which power is exercised through both military and economic means, and where regional stability is contingent upon the interplay of these dual logics.

Table

Region/ Country	Geopolitical Conflict	Geoeconomic Conflict	Notes / Drivers
Ukraine	High	High	Russian military in Crimea/Donbas; energy transit leverage; NATO-EU support; frozen conflicts.
Moldova / Transnistria	Medium	Medium-High	Russian troops in Transnistria; energy dependency; EU support via Eastern Partnership.
Belarus	High	Medium	Russian military and political dominance; economic dependency; limited EU influence.
Georgia	High	Medium	Russian occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; EU/NATO support; infrastructure development.
Armenia	Medium	Medium	Russian military base; influence in Nagorno-Karabakh; Chinese economic investment limited.
Azerbaijan	Medium	High	Geopolitical tension in Nagorno-Karabakh; energy export routes (pipelines) are critical for EU diversification.
Serbia	Medium	Medium	NATO membership tension; EU

			accession negotiations; Russian influence; Chinese BRI investments.
Kosovo	Medium	Low-Medium	Political disputes with Serbia; limited infrastructure leverage; EU/NATO presence.
Western Balkans (Montenegro, Bosnia, N. Macedonia)	Low-Medium	Medium	Residual ethnic/nationalist tensions; EU/NATO integration programs; Chinese BRI influence.
Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania)	High	Medium	Russian military airspace violations; high NATO presence; EU energy diversification reduces dependency.
Black Sea littoral (Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey)	Medium	High	Russian influence via pipelines; strategic ports; NATO bases; EU infrastructure support.

The European Union itself does not claim borders, but some EU Member States have unsettled or disputed boundaries. Most internal EU borders are legally settled, though a few legacy disputes remain. Slovenia and Croatia have an unresolved **land and maritime dispute**, mainly over the Gulf of Piran. An arbitration ruling was issued in 2017, but Croatia refuses to implement it. Spain and Portugal's border is largely settled. However, Portugal maintains a dormant historical claim over Olivenza, controlled by Spain.The Kingdom of Denmark has made a bid for the delimitation of the continental shelf and EEZ of Greenland onto the Arctic Ocean towards the Northpole[1]. It will engage in dialogue with Russia on the delimitation of the Lomonossov-ridge, which Russia is entitled to exploit. The International Seabed authority , where the EU is represented by the EEAS, excercises authority over the exploration and the exploitation over the deep sea bed ressoruces. To prevent unregulated commercial fishing in the high seas of the Central Arctic Ocean, allowing for scientific research to understand the ecosystem before any exploitation, a a Central Arctoc Ocean Fisheries Agreement has been agreed to[2] Moratoriums are initiated on oil and gas explorations. Greece has long-standing maritime and airspace disputes with Turkey in the Aegean Sea. These involve territorial waters, EEZs, and frequent airspace incidents.Cyprus also has maritime disputes with Turkey, linked to energy exploration and the Cyprus conflict. Overall, the EU's unsettled borders are limited in number but politically sensitive and strategically important.

Linking EU Member States' EEZs would strengthen the EU's economic, environmental, and geopolitical power by enabling unified fisheries management, maritime spatial planning, offshore energy development, and maritime security. It would support sustainable fisheries through basin-wide quotas, reduce conflicts between fishing, energy, and conservation uses, and improve cross-border planning for offshore renewables and marine protection. However, it would be legally complex and politically sensitive, since EEZs remain national competences under international law, and many states would resist transferring sovereignty.

EEZ Hubs are now being examined in various geographies under Memorandum of Under-standing with Frontex for instance in the context of the still unsettled maritime borders at the southern end of the Adriatic between Albania and Greece to signal commitment and agility within time and budget. Corfu has become a tourist trap, the seas are dying and the marine protected areas are neither defined

[1] https://arcticportal.org/the-arctic-portlet/countries/arctic-portlet-countries-greenland

[2] https://arcticportal.org/arctic-governance/international-agreements#:~:text=It%20entered%20into%20force%20on,in%20increments%20of%20five%20years.

nor policed in the area off the Otranto Bay area.

Exclusive competence in air safety under the EU internal market implies that only the EU can legislate and adopt binding rules in this field, and Member States may act only if empowered by the EU. Practically, this means uniform safety standards across the EU, covering aircraft certification, airlines, airports, air traffic management, and pilot licensing, mainly through EASA rules. It prevents national divergence that could distort competition or undermine safety in the internal aviation market. Member States retain operational roles (oversight, inspections, enforcement), but cannot set parallel or conflicting safety rules.Externally, it gives the EU stronger leverage to negotiate aviation safety agreements with third countries as a single regulatory actor.

Summary

An EEAS office dedicated to sub-regional organisations must tailor its intervention priorities to the distinct geopolitical and geoeconomic configurations of each region adjacent to Europe. Although the overarching logic derives from regional security theory — which emphasises proximity, interdependence, and the clustering of security dynamics — each sub-regional context presents unique institutional landscapes and conflict patterns. Applying the phased intervention framework to these regions illustrates how the EEAS can operationalise its strategic objectives through existing sub-regional bodies.

In **Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region**, the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) provides a platform through which the EEAS can pursue stabilisation and resilience-building. Given the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the militarisation of the Black Sea, the initial phase of engagement should prioritise conflict-prevention mechanisms, including enhanced maritime situational awareness and cooperative risk-reduction dialogues. BSEC's economic mandate also enables the EU to address geoeconomic vulnerabilities by supporting diversification of transport corridors and energy routes, particularly in Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine. Through this organisation, the EEAS can promote transparent infrastructure governance and reduce exposure to coercive economic practices, while simultaneously strengthening political dialogue on regulatory convergence and connectivity standards.

In the **Western Balkans**, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) serve as key institutional anchors. The region's persistent political tensions — especially between Serbia and Kosovo — require the EEAS to foreground conflict-management and confidence-building measures in its initial phase of engagement. The RCC's mandate in security cooperation and governance reform provides an avenue for supporting early-warning systems, countering disinformation, and fostering cross-border trust. As the intervention shifts toward resilience-building, CEFTA becomes central to reducing geoeconomic fragmentation by facilitating trade integration, harmonising standards, and strengthening supply-chain connectivity. These efforts help mitigate external influence by embedding the region more deeply within a rules-based economic space aligned with EU norms. The final phase, centred on normative alignment, is particularly relevant in the Western Balkans, where EU accession perspectives create strong incentives for political and institutional convergence.

In the **South Caucasus**, the Black Sea Synergy framework and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) provide the EEAS with structured channels for engagement. The region's security environment is shaped by the unresolved Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, Russian military presence, and contested territories in Georgia. The first phase of intervention must therefore emphasise stabilisation, including support for ceasefire monitoring, confidence-building between communities, and technical assistance for border management. As the EEAS moves into resilience-building, the EaP's economic and governance instruments become essential for addressing geoeconomic vulnerabilities, particularly in energy transit, digital infrastructure, and financial exposure. The EU's support for the Southern Gas Corridor illustrates how geoeconomic interventions can simultaneously enhance regional autonomy and reduce the leverage of external actors. In the final phase, political dialogue and normative alignment can be advanced through EaP platforms that promote judicial reform, anti-corruption measures, and regulatory approximation.

In the **Baltic Sea region**, the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) offers a mature institutional environment for implementing the EEAS's priorities. Given the heightened geopolitical tensions between Russia and the Baltic States, the initial phase of engagement should reinforce cooperative security initiatives, including civil protection, maritime safety, and cyber-resilience. The CBSS's strong focus on societal security allows the EEAS to address hybrid threats, disinformation, and critical-infrastructure vulnerabilities. As the intervention progresses, the EEAS can support geoeconomic resilience through regional energy diversification, particularly via LNG terminals and electricity interconnectors that reduce dependence on external suppliers. The final phase, centred on normative alignment, is facilitated by the CBSS's long-standing emphasis on democratic governance, rule of law, and sustainable development, which aligns closely with EU strategic objectives.

In the **Mediterranean**, the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) provides a broad platform for addressing the intertwined geopolitical and geoeconomic challenges of the region. The initial phase of engagement must focus on stabilisation, particularly in relation to migration pressures, maritime security, and the spillover effects of conflicts in North Africa and the Middle East. The UfM's cooperative mechanisms enable the EEAS to support crisis-management capacities and cross-border

coordination. As the intervention shifts toward resilience-building, the UfM's economic and environmental programmes become essential for addressing structural vulnerabilities, including energy dependence, water scarcity, and labour-market fragility. The final phase, involving political dialogue and normative alignment, is more complex in this region due to divergent governance models, but the UfM nonetheless provides a forum for promoting regulatory cooperation, sustainable development norms, and inclusive economic governance.

In summary, these examples demonstrate how the EEAS can translate regional security theory into practice by aligning its phased intervention priorities with the institutional capacities of sub-regional organisations. Each region adjacent to Europe presents a distinct constellation of geopolitical tensions and geoeconomic dependencies, yet all offer institutional entry points through which the EU can promote stability, resilience, and long-term normative convergence. The result is a coherent, region-sensitive strategy that strengthens the EU's ability to shape its neighbourhood through partnership rather than coercion.

5.Challenges

Sub-regional organizations—such as the **Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the Arctic Council, the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), and the South East Europe Cooperation Process (SECEP)**—play a critical role in shaping regional stability, economic integration, and security cooperation. These organizations operate as platforms for coordination among neighboring states, facilitating dialogue on political, economic, and security issues, often complementing broader EU policies. They serve as both incubators for regional projects and as intermediaries between the EU and local actors, helping translate EU priorities into actionable programs at the regional level.

The **EEAS** engages with these sub-regional organizations in several ways. It provides political guidance, diplomatic outreach, and coordination of EU-funded initiatives, ensuring that EU policies are coherent and aligned with both strategic objectives and local sensitivities. Through these interactions, the EEAS acts as a bridge, integrating sub-regional dynamics into broader EU foreign policy, security frameworks, and development cooperation strategies.

The relationship is inherently **mutually reinforcing but asymmetrical**. While sub-regional organizations gain institutional legitimacy, technical support, and access to EU funding, the EU leverages these platforms to extend influence, strengthen norms (such as governance, rule of law, and human rights), and enhance regional stability without direct intervention. Challenges arise when organizational capacities vary widely, political divergences between member states persist, or external actors (e.g., Russia, China, Turkey) exert countervailing influence, requiring careful EU coordination through the EEAS and member-state diplomacy.

Effective engagement requires:

- Clear mapping of sub-regional mandates and priorities.
- Tailored EU support balancing technical assistance, financial resources, and political backing.
- A robust coordination mechanism within the EEAS to ensure alignment with EU strategic goals.
- Flexibility to accommodate the differing agendas of regional members while maintaining EU normative standards.

6.EU Policy and Political Guidelines on Regional Cooperation in External Frameworks

The European Union engages in regional cooperation beyond its borders as part of a comprehensive strategy to promote stability, sustainable development, and the projection of EU norms and values. This engagement is guided by principles of **multilateralism, adherence to international law, economic integration, environmental sustainability, and conflict prevention**. Through targeted political dialogue, technical assistance, and funding support, the EU seeks to foster resilient regional frameworks, strengthen cross-border networks, and align external regions with broader European and transatlantic priorities.

The EU's approach varies across key regional platforms:

Table

Regional Organization	EU Role	Strategic Priorities
Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC)	Strategic partner, policy dialogue, project co-funding	Economic integration, transport and energy connectivity, environmental protection, regional stability

Arctic Council / Euro-Arctic	Observer and partner, scientific collaboration	Sustainable development, climate change mitigation, shipping route governance, indigenous rights
Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)	Co-chair, project facilitation, funding	Economic development, energy transition, infrastructure, migration management, political stability
Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS)	Strategic partner, program support	Maritime security, environmental protection, socio-economic cohesion, cross-border collaboration
Euro-Barents / Barents Cooperation	Policy coordination, project funding	Natural resource management, sustainable economic development, climate adaptation, indigenous communities' rights

Across these frameworks, the EU combines **strategic dialogue, technical cooperation, and funding instruments** to enhance regional resilience, foster governance structures aligned with EU norms, and support sustainable growth. The overarching objective is to integrate external regions into **cooperative European networks** while addressing security, economic, and environmental challenges in a coordinated manner.

7.EEAS Level of Representation

The **level of representation** an organization maintains in a sub-regional or multilateral forum is a critical indicator of both its diplomatic weight and its ability to influence outcomes. For the **European External Action Service (EEAS)**, participating at the **summit, senior official, or working committee levels** signals the EU's commitment to the forum, shapes its capacity to advance strategic interests, and determines the depth of policy engagement possible.

High-level presence at summits or ministerial meetings conveys **political recognition** of the EEAS as a key interlocutor, reinforces the EU's role as a strategic actor, and facilitates decisions on major initiatives or financial support. Senior official representation ensures continuity of dialogue, operational coordination, and the capacity to shape agendas and policy recommendations. Working committee participation, meanwhile, enables technical engagement, monitoring of regional developments, and the translation of EU strategies into concrete actions.

Recognition as a credible diplomatic interlocutor is particularly important for the EEAS, as it legitimizes its role vis-à-vis member states, sub-regional organizations, and third-country partners. The combination of **formal representation and sustained technical engagement** allows the EEAS to influence regional governance, align external partners with EU norms, and strengthen the coherence and visibility of the EU's external action.

Table

Subregional Forum	Organization Summit level	Senior Official Level	Working Committee Level
BSEC (Black Sea Economic Cooperation)	Occasionally (Foreign Ministers or Special Summits)	Regularly (Ambassadors, BSEC PERMIS Board)	Regularly (EEAS Desk Officers, national experts)
CBSS (Council of the Baltic Sea States)	Rarely	Occasionally (Senior Officials, Committee of Senior Officials)	Regularly (EEAS/Baltic Desk, technical experts)
Arctic Council	Rarely (Ministerial meetings, mostly environment/security)	Occasionally (Senior Arctic Officials, national Arctic reps)	Regularly (Working Groups on science, environment, indigenous issues)
Euro-Arctic Barents Council	Rarely	Occasionally (Senior Officials)	Regularly (Working Group level, EEAS northern desk)
UfM (Union for the Mediterranean)	Occasionally (Foreign Ministers)	Regularly (Senior Officials Committee, EU Co-Presidency staff)	Regularly (Technical Committees, EEAS regional desk)
SECEP (South-East European Cooperation Process)	Occasionally	Regularly (Senior Officials Committee, Ambassadors)	Regularly (Working groups, EEAS desk officers)
Visegrad 4 (V4)	Regularly (Summit of Heads of State/Government)	Regularly (Senior Officials / Foreign Ministers)	Regularly (Working Groups on sectoral policy, EEAS V4 desk)
Central European Initiative (CEI)	Occasionally	Regularly	Regularly
GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council)	Occasionally (Foreign Ministers / Summits with EU)	Regularly (Senior Officials, EU-GCC Political Dialogue)	Regularly (EEAS Gulf Desk, technical experts)

Observations / Patterns:

1. **Summit level**: Reserved for high-level strategic engagement or political statements; frequent in V4, UfM, occasional in GCC, BSEC.
2. **Senior Officials**: Most forums have regular senior official participation to coordinate political and economic priorities.
3. **Working Committee**: EEAS is most active at this level in all sub-regional fora; this is where policy work, reporting, and technical cooperation happens.
4. **Geographic focus**: Northern (Arctic, CBSS, Barents) tends to rely more on Working Groups due to technical/scientific cooperation; Southern/Mediterranean and Gulf subregion have stronger Summit and Senior Official engagement for political and security priorities.

The **level of representation** in sub-regional and multilateral forums is a key measure of the EEAS's diplomatic influence. Summit participation signals political recognition and strategic engagement, enabling the EU to shape agendas, secure commitments, and demonstrate its presence as a credible actor. Senior officials ensure continuity, translating high-level priorities into concrete policy actions, while working committees provide technical expertise, monitor developments, and implement EU strategies on the ground. Recognition as a legitimate interlocutor enhances trust, strengthens credibility in crises, and allows the EEAS to network and coordinate effectively with partners. Balancing engagement across all levels maximizes the EU's influence, combining political visibility with operational depth, and ensures that both strategic goals and practical objectives are achieved efficiently.

8.Political Goals and Objectives

Now to a certain extent there is a variety of political goals and practical objectives the different sub-regional organisations have to fulfill typically described in the charters of the individual organisatons:

1. Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) According to the BSEC Charter and operational documents, the organization seeks to promote peace, stability, and prosperity in the Black Sea region through enhanced economic cooperation and the development of good-neighbourly relations. Strategic goals include fostering mutual respect and trust among member states, facilitating private and collective economic initiatives, and promoting regional economic integration across transport, energy, agriculture, environment, tourism, science and technology, and governance sectors. Practical objectives comprise facilitating infrastructure connectivity and trade liberalization, harmonizing customs and transport procedures, supporting small and medium enterprises (SMEs), promoting environmental and climate cooperation, and strengthening collaboration with international organizations.

2. Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) The CBSS aims to build a regional identity and strengthen cohesion across the Baltic Sea region while fostering a secure, safe, and sustainable environment. Its strategic priorities encompass enhancing resilience to cross-border security challenges and promoting socio-economic development. Operational objectives include supporting sustainable growth and competitiveness, advancing environmental protection and climate action, addressing societal security issues, fostering education and cultural cooperation, and enhancing regional collaboration in transport, research, and civil security sectors.

3. Arctic Council The Arctic Council, as referenced in EU Arctic policy communications, pursues the protection of the Arctic environment, the promotion of sustainable development, and the strengthening of peace and stability in the region. Strategic goals emphasize the inclusion of indigenous communities and the integration of scientific knowledge in policy-making. Practical objectives include fostering cross-border cooperation on climate and environmental issues, supporting research initiatives, and promoting sustainable economic activities in line with green and blue transition objectives.

4. Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) The BEAC seeks to promote stability, progress, peace, and security in the Barents Region, facilitating cooperation at governmental and regional levels. Its practical objectives are implemented through working groups addressing environment, transport, health, culture, and indigenous rights. The Council prioritizes sustainable development and regional connectivity, consistent with its founding declarations and joint ministerial statements.

5. Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) The UfM's overarching goal is to promote stability, human development, and regional integration in the Euro-Mediterranean area. Strategic priorities emphasize fostering dialogue between European and Mediterranean states. Operational objectives include supporting economic development, employment, and private sector engagement; enhancing education, research, and mobility; advancing cooperation in energy, transport, water, and urban planning; and facilitating the implementation of joint regional projects.

6. South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) The SEECP is designed to strengthen good-neighbourly relations and transform Southeast Europe into a region of peace, security, and cooperation. Strategic objectives include facilitating integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures. Practical objectives focus on enhancing political and security cooperation, fostering economic collaboration, and promoting democratic governance, justice, and the rule of law.

7. Visegrad Group (V4) The V4 aims to deepen cooperation among Central European states across political, economic, social, and cultural domains. Strategic goals emphasize regional integration, mutual contacts, and collaboration with neighbouring states and broader partners. Operational objectives include implementing joint initiatives in education, research, culture, security, energy, and the environment, as well as coordinating cross-border projects and EU-aligned policies.

8. Central European Initiative (CEI) The CEI promotes regional cooperation and economic transformation among member states, supporting integration into European structures. Strategic goals emphasize cooperative development, economic modernization, and the promotion of stability across Central Europe. Practical objectives include implementing transnational projects in economic, cultural, and institutional domains, promoting cohesion, and enhancing cooperation with EU institutions and international partners.

9. Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) The GCC Charter outlines strategic goals of fostering regional unity, collective political cooperation, and shared security among member states. Economic integration, including the creation of a customs union and common market, is central to the Council's priorities. Operational objectives comprise promoting political stability and diplomatic collaboration, harmonizing economic and social policies, strengthening regional security, and facilitating dialogue with international partners to enhance peace and stability.

Table

Sub-regional	Strategic Goals	Practical Objectives	EEAS Added Value
BSEC	Promote peace, stability, prosperity; foster economic integration and good-neighbourly relations	Facilitate infrastructure, trade liberalization, SME support, environment/climate cooperation	Provides policy alignment with EU economic, transport, and energy strategies; supports project funding and coordination; ensures EU normative standards in regional development
CBSS	Strengthen regional identity, security, and sustainable development	Promote growth, climate action, societal security, education, cross-sectoral cooperation	Enhances policy coherence, provides expertise in security and sustainability, channels EU funding and best practices for regional projects
Arctic Council	Protect environment; promote sustainable development and stability; integrate indigenous communities	Cross-border climate cooperation, scientific research, sustainable economic activities	Facilitates EU Arctic strategy integration, coordinates scientific initiatives, ensures adherence to EU environmental norms
Barents Euro-Arctic Council	Promote stability, progress, peace, and security	Sectoral cooperation in environment, transport, health, culture, indigenous rights	Supports EU policy coherence in northern Europe, links regional working groups to EU programs, reinforces sustainable development standards
UfM	Promote stability, human development, and regional integration	Economic development, employment, research, energy, transport, project implementation	Acts as EU co-chair, ensures alignment with EU Mediterranean policies, mobilizes EU financing and technical expertise
SEECP	Strengthen good-neighbourly relations, peace, security, and European integration	Political/security cooperation, economic collaboration, governance and justice	Enhances EU normative influence, coordinates regional security initiatives, supports integration into European frameworks

V4	Deepen political, economic, social, cultural cooperation	Joint projects in research, culture, security, energy, cross-border initiatives	Provides strategic guidance and alignment with EU policies, facilitates knowledge exchange and funding mechanisms
CEI	Support economic transformation and European integration; promote stability	Implement transnational projects, enhance cohesion, cooperate with EU	Strengthens institutional linkages with EU, provides project management expertise, ensures policy coherence
GCC	Foster regional unity, collective security, and economic integration	Political collaboration, policy harmonization, security, international dialogue	Supports EU-GCC political dialogue, aligns regional initiatives with EU external action goals, enhances crisis response and normative influence

Summary: The EEAS plays a critical role in **bridging EU strategic objectives and sub-regional operational needs**. Its engagement at multiple levels—summit, senior official, and working committee—ensures both political visibility and technical influence. By aligning regional initiatives with EU norms, mobilizing resources, and providing continuous policy support, the EEAS enhances the effectiveness, legitimacy, and sustainability of sub-regional cooperation across Europe, the Arctic, the Mediterranean, and the Gulf.

Implications for EEAS Programming and Intervention: Steering Capacity

EEAS programming must differentiate between summit, senior official, and working committee levels, tailoring interventions to the influence each level affords. Summit-level engagement should be leveraged for high-visibility initiatives, securing political commitment, and endorsing large-scale regional projects. This requires careful preparation of joint statements, strategic agendas, and EU-led proposals to maximize influence. Engagement at the senior official level is critical for operational oversight, follow-up on summit decisions, and translating political priorities into actionable programs. Interventions at this level emphasize coordination across member states and sub-regional partners, ensuring alignment with EU strategic objectives. Working committee-level engagement forms the operational backbone of EU steering capacity, focusing on technical guidance, project monitoring, capacity-building, and ensuring that EU-funded programs adhere to established norms and standards.

The EEAS must ensure that sub-regional interventions are consistent with EU external action strategies, including climate, economic, security, and governance priorities. By participating across all levels, the EEAS strengthens agenda-setting power, shaping the focus of working groups and ministerial discussions to reflect EU normative frameworks. Steering capacity is enhanced through the integration of policy instruments, including EU financial resources, technical expertise, and political leverage. Effective interventions require the EEAS to allocate human, financial, and technical resources strategically, prioritizing regions and initiatives where EU influence can be maximized. This includes deploying desk officers and liaison staff to monitor working group activities, providing funding to align regional projects with EU objectives, and coordinating expertise across multiple sectors. Programming should be adaptive, allowing for dynamic reallocation of resources in response to emerging crises, political shifts, or opportunities for strategic leverage.

EEAS interventions combine normative influence, promoting EU standards in governance, human rights, and environmental protection, with technical assistance in capacity-building, project design, and implementation support. This dual approach reinforces the EU's credibility as a regional partner while ensuring that sub-regional organizations achieve practical outcomes consistent with EU priorities. Steering capacity relies on systematic monitoring of sub-regional initiatives, ensuring timely reporting on policy implementation and project outcomes. Feedback mechanisms from working groups to senior officials and summit levels enable rapid adjustments to programs and interventions. Data-driven assessment

strengthens accountability, informs strategic decisions, and enhances credibility among partners and member states. High-level representation also provides rapid-response capacity during political or security crises, ensuring continuity of dialogue and facilitating conflict prevention or mediation. Programmatic interventions should incorporate scenario planning for political, economic, or environmental disruptions, enabling pre-emptive deployment of expertise and resources.

Effective steering requires active engagement with other international organizations, donors, and regional institutions. EEAS programming should formalize partnerships to coordinate interventions, prevent duplication, and leverage complementary resources. Networking also enhances visibility and ensures that EU-led initiatives are embedded within broader regional strategies. Beyond immediate project implementation, EEAS interventions should invest in regional institutional capacity, including training, knowledge transfer, and technical support. Strengthening partner institutions enhances sustainability, ensures alignment with EU priorities, and expands the EU's long-term steering capacity across multiple sub-regions.

In summary, EEAS programming and interventions in sub-regional organizations must be multi-layered, adaptive, and strategically aligned. By calibrating engagement across summit, senior official, and working committee levels, the EEAS maximizes political visibility, operational coordination, and technical impact. Steering capacity is strengthened through coherent policy alignment, resource optimization, normative and technical guidance, systematic monitoring, crisis preparedness, and strategic partnerships. Together, these measures ensure that the EEAS not only supports sub-regional objectives but actively shapes the direction and effectiveness of regional cooperation in alignment with EU external action priorities.

This then brings us to the political guidelines from which an EU strategy on Europe's Sub-regionals flows and then the organisation to administer policy is built *ceteris paribus.*

9.Evolution of Political Guidelines

The European Union's engagement in regional cooperation is guided by a set of **political guidelines** that articulate both strategic objectives and normative principles. These guidelines define the EU's role in multilateral frameworks, such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), the Arctic Council, the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), and Barents/Euro-Arctic cooperation. Across these regions, EU political guidelines emphasize multilateralism, adherence to international law, sustainable development, conflict prevention, and the promotion of EU norms and values, including human rights, good governance, and environmental protection.

Guidelines or guidance can be defined as advisory recommendations or frameworks intended to inform decisions, behavior, or actions without being legally binding. They provide direction, best practices, or suggested approaches to achieve certain objectives, while allowing flexibility for context-specific adaptation.

In other words, guidelines are structured advice that helps individuals, organizations, or governments act in a consistent, informed, and effective manner, but they do not carry the force of law or mandatory requirement like regulations or rules.

This dovetails with purposeful activities endorsed in several policy cycles' political guidelines on sub regional organisations personnel but this is not necessarily synomonous with impact on the ground.

To ensure that these guidelines are effective, we could rely on **comparison and evaluation**, or epikrisis, as an analytical method. Epikrisis involves systematically assessing policy design and implementation against pre-established objectives, drawing comparisons across regions, time periods, and institutional contexts. Through this process, the EU can identify best practices, highlight areas of underperformance, and determine whether strategic goals are being achieved on the ground. Evaluation in this sense is both **diagnostic and forward-looking**: it measures outcomes, informs adjustments to ongoing initiatives, and strengthens the coherence of future policy interventions.

The **evolution of EU regional cooperation policy** from the 1990s to 2025 illustrates the interplay between political guidelines and epikrisis. In the 1990s, the EU's approach was largely **activity-focused**, with ad hoc initiatives in post-Cold War regions and limited harmonization across sectors or regions. Political guidelines were aspirational, and evaluation mechanisms were often informal or project-specific. By the 2000s and 2010s, the EU began to **institutionalize coordination**, introducing multi-year strategies, macro-regional frameworks, and cross-sectoral planning that aligned purposeful activities with normative and strategic objectives. Epikrisis became central in this evolution, enabling the EU to compare outcomes across regional initiatives, assess impact relative to CFSP objectives, and refine policy tools.

By 2025, the EU's political guidelines reflect a **strategically harmonized, multi-dimensional approach**: purposeful activities are embedded in long-term frameworks, linked to CFSP objectives, and evaluated systematically to ensure measurable impact. Comparison and evaluation function as a **feedback loop**, integrating lessons learned from previous initiatives, guiding resource allocation, and reinforcing the alignment of operational activities with broader strategic goals. In this way, the evolution of EU policy demonstrates a clear trajectory from **ad hoc engagement toward coordinated, outcome-oriented, and CFSP-aligned regional cooperation**, with epikrisis serving as both a tool of accountability and a driver of continuous policy

improvement

Table Comparative Table: Evolution of EU Political Guidelines on Regional Cooperation (1990s–2025)

Dimension / Parameter	**1990s–2000s (Emergence & Ad Hoc Orientation)**	**2025 (Strategic & Harmonized Framework)**
Strategic Orientation	Pilot and project-oriented frameworks; often **ad hoc cooperation** built around emergent needs (post-Cold War transition).	**Strategic, integrated approaches** linking regional cooperation with broader geopolitical priorities (security, connectivity, resilience).
Key Policy Frameworks / Documents	Early regional cooperation often informed through **Northern Dimension Action Plan (2000–2003)** and similar early action plans to improve coordination in northern Europe. (Consilium)	**Black Sea Strategic Approach (Joint Communication 2025)**; EU Strategy for the Black Sea Region; **Reaffirmations in European Parliament Arctic recommendations (2025)**.
Harmonization Across Regions	Limited harmonization—regional formats had **separate mechanisms**, often unconnected except through general ENP references; CSS (e.g., Baltic and Barents) relied on ad hoc interoperability.	Greater **policy convergence and coordination**, aligning regional cooperation with EU's external action, trade, security, and environmental norms (e.g., connectivity corridors, hybrid threat preparedness). (
Institutional Coordination	Fragmented: cooperation relied on external relations DG, mixed ENP pillars, and Council actions; coordination across DGs was limited.	**Cross-institutional planning** with EEAS, DG NEAR, DG MOVE, and European Parliament inputs, streamlining efforts across thematic priorities. (
Purposeful Activities vs Strategic Aims	Emphasis on **discrete activities** (energy/transport dialogues like INOGATE, Northern Dimension projects) rather than long-term,	Activities are increasingly **embedded in strategic frameworks** that link cooperation to geo-economic stability, climate resilience, and

	overarching strategic goals. (	security (e.g., EU Black Sea strategy addressing connectivity and hybrid threats). (
Normative Alignment (EU Values)	Often implicit—ENP articulated values like stability and governance, but implementation varied by context.	Clearer incorporation of EU norms (human rights, rule of law, environmental standards) as **explicit components of cooperation frameworks**. (
Monitoring and Implementation	Limited mechanisms for measurement; success often defined by number of activities rather than outcomes.	**Monitoring and indicators tied to strategic objectives** (connectivity, security, sustainability), though challenges remain (e.g., strategies without dedicated funding). (European Parliament)
Goal Achievement	**Incremental and mixed**: created forums but often without deep structural impact (e.g., Black Sea Synergy lacked robust funding/strategic follow-through). (EUR-Lex)	**More tangible outcomes** in macro-regional strategies (e.g., Baltic Sea Strategy objectives on environment, connectivity, prosperity) and reinforced political commitments in regions like the Black Sea. (
External Geopolitical Context	Shaped by post-Cold War transition and EU enlargement; cooperation often reactive to enlargement outcomes.	Heavily shaped by geopolitical dynamics (e.g., Russian war of aggression affecting Black Sea and Northern cooperation), prompting **strategic recalibration** and security priorities. (
Role of Multilateral Platforms	Engagement through cooperation forums was exploratory and largely **operational** (e.g., INOGATE, early Arctic dialogues).	EU participates strategically in **Arctic Council**, **Barents Euro-Arctic Council**, **UfM**, and Baltic cooperation spaces, often shaping agendas and integrating EU policies in these multilateral contexts. (

Brief Analytical Summary

Over the past three decades, EU political guidelines for regional cooperation have shifted significantly. In the **1990s and early 2000s**, EU engagement was **activity-oriented**, spurred by enlargement and emergent regional needs, with limited cross-regional harmonization. The launch of frameworks like the Northern Dimension and Black Sea Synergy served as early attempts at cooperation coordination but remained **functionally discrete and under-institutionalized**. By **2025**, EU guidelines have evolved toward **strategically harmonized, cross-sectoral** frameworks embedding cooperation within broader geopolitical, security, environmental, and economic agendas. Purposeful activities are no longer isolated — they are tightly linked to policy objectives reflecting EU values and strategic interests, although **implementation challenges and uneven achievements** remain across regions. Overall, the trajectory demonstrates a maturation of EU external engagement from operational cooperation toward **strategically orchestrated regional governance**.

The concept of an organization **"controlling the environment"** is highly relevant in the context of sub-regional engagement. In international relations and institutional theory, control over the operational environment does not imply domination in a coercive sense, but rather the capacity to **shape rules, norms, and incentives** that govern actor behavior. For the EEAS, sub-regional organizations present a complex environment with multiple stakeholders, diverse regulatory frameworks, and varying levels of institutional capacity. By exercising influence over this environment—through coordination, normative guidance, and strategic programming—the EEAS can create conditions conducive to the achievement of EU objectives. This includes harmonizing policies, aligning funding with EU priorities, and guiding institutional reforms, which collectively strengthen the EU's steering capacity across political, economic, and technical domains.

At the same time, the notion of **strategic stringency**—the selective and disciplined application of rules, standards, and priorities—reinforces the organization's ability to steer effectively. Stringency ensures that interventions are not diluted by over-extension or fragmentation, and that sub-regional engagement remains coherent with broader EU external action goals. In practice, strategic stringency allows the EEAS to set clear conditionalities for funding, define sectoral priorities, and maintain high-level oversight across multiple programs. This ensures that the EU's influence is **both focused and credible**, signaling to partners that engagement comes with expectations of alignment with EU norms, governance standards, and sustainability objectives.

Combined, environmental control and strategic stringency create a **structured operational space** in which the EEAS can exercise maximal leverage. Control over the environment provides the capacity to orchestrate partnerships, align interests, and anticipate regional dynamics, while strategic stringency ensures that this influence is deployed effectively and efficiently. Without this dual approach, financial instruments, technical assistance, and normative interventions risk being reactive, fragmented, or inconsistent, diminishing their impact. Conversely, a disciplined and strategically calibrated engagement strengthens the EU's role as a normative and operational actor, enabling it to guide regional organizations toward stability, development, and resilience.

In the context of sub-regional financial instruments, environmental control justifies the EU's capacity to target funding strategically, selecting sectors and projects that shape the operational environment in line with EU priorities. Strategic stringency ensures that this funding is conditional, monitored, and aligned with long-term objectives, creating both predictability and leverage. Together, these principles allow the EEAS to **steer sub-regional cooperation proactively**, enhancing both immediate outcomes and the sustainability of EU influence across diverse geopolitical contexts.

10.Towards an EU Strategy for Europe's Sub-regionals

A strategy can be defined as **a coherent plan of action designed to achieve specific long-term objectives by aligning available resources, capabilities, and actions with anticipated opportunities and constraints in the environment.**

In scholarly and policy contexts, a strategy is not simply a set of ad hoc decisions; it is characterized by:

1. **Purposefulness** – it is oriented toward clearly defined goals or desired outcomes.
2. **Coherence** – the actions and policies are logically aligned and mutually reinforcing.
3. **Resource alignment** – it considers the allocation and management of human, financial, and material resources.
4. **Environmental awareness** – it accounts for external conditions, including risks, opportunities, and competitive or adversarial pressures.
5. **Adaptive capacity** – it anticipates uncertainty and allows for adjustments in response to changing circumstances.

In short, strategy is **the art and science of deliberately guiding actions to bridge the gap between current conditions and future objectives**, whether in business, military, political, or institutional contexts.

Europe's sub-regional organizations—ranging from the Black Sea Economic Cooperation and the Council of the Baltic Sea States to the Visegrad Group and the Central European Initiative—play an increasingly important role in regional governance, security, and economic integration. While the EU has engaged with these organizations through a combination of policy dialogue, technical cooperation, and

funding programs, experience shows that the approach has been **piecemeal and reactive**, often relying on ad hoc interventions rather than a coherent, long-term strategy. Political guidelines, communications, and instruments applied until now have delivered mixed results: while some technical and sectoral objectives have been achieved, the EU's ability to **assert influence strategically, align sub-regional activity with EU norms, and coordinate interventions across multiple levels** remains limited. The lack of a unified framework constrains both visibility and effectiveness, and diminishes the EU's capacity to shape regional dynamics in a way that safeguards its interests and advances its strategic objectives.

As the EU has enlarged, it is undeniable that the sub-regionals has become less interesting as a tool for change management in areas that are now effectively EU seas such as the Baltic, the Adriatic and partially the Black Sea. These are now covered by macro-regional strategies.

The EU's macro-regional strategies (MRS) are policy frameworks designed to foster cooperation across borders in regions that share common challenges and opportunities. The three major strategies relevant here are the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), which focuses on environmental protection, economic growth, and connectivity across northern Europe; the Danube/Black Sea Region (EUSDR and Black Sea Synergy), which addresses energy, transport, environmental security, and socio-economic development in southeastern Europe and the Black Sea; and the Adriatic–Ionian Region (EUSAIR), emphasizing maritime economy, sustainable tourism, connectivity, and disaster resilience. These strategies are integrative but flexible, linking EU internal policies with neighboring countries' development without requiring formal EU membership.

Subregionals operate at a narrower scale, concentrating on specific countries or geographically tighter areas, such as the Visegrád Group initiatives, the Central European Initiative, or Black Sea Economic Cooperation projects. Macro-regional strategies provide the overarching framework, defining thematic priorities that the EU aims to promote in a given sea basin, while subregional strategies translate these priorities into concrete projects, tailoring solutions to local conditions. This relationship is mutually reinforcing, as successful subregional initiatives build credibility for the macro strategy, and MRS funding and visibility strengthen subregional cooperation. For example, the EUSBSR's focus on the maritime economy is implemented through projects among the Baltic States, Poland, and Finland, while in the Black Sea, EUSDR priorities are aligned with BSEC energy and transport initiatives.

Enlargement functions as a critical stabilizing mechanism. By offering a credible accession perspective, the EU incentivizes reforms, rule-of-law compliance, and regional cooperation. Candidate countries align their policies with EU standards in governance, economy, and security, reducing sources of instability. Macro-regional strategies and subregional projects work in tandem with this enlargement process, creating cooperation habits and shared projects that facilitate eventual accession while fostering trust between EU members and neighboring states. In the Adriatic–Ionian region, for instance, EUSAIR projects strengthen connectivity and economic governance in Western Balkan countries, directly supporting the EU's enlargement agenda.

Looking forward, maximizing the stabilizing potential of macro-regional and subregional strategies requires aligning MRS projects with enlargement timelines so they explicitly help candidate countries meet EU accession benchmarks. Cross-sea connectivity should be strengthened to create an EU "maritime spine" that integrates subregions, while multi-level governance ensures that EU institutions, national governments, and local authorities coordinate effectively to translate macro priorities into tangible local outcomes. Trust mechanisms should be institutionalized, enabling EU members, candidate, and neighboring states to jointly manage projects and crises. Finally, linking economic development, environmental protection, and conflict prevention ensures that stability is comprehensive and sustainable.

In summary, macro-regional strategies set the overarching EU vision for a sea basin, subregional strategies operationalize it locally, and enlargement functions as a trust- and stability-building mechanism. Together, they form a layered framework of governance that ties EU internal cohesion to neighborhood stabilization.

A dedicated EU strategy for sub-regional engagement would therefore serve several purposes. First, it would allow for **the systematic assertion of control over the operational environment**, enabling the EU to shape norms, incentives, and institutional behaviors in line with European priorities. Second, it would provide the basis for **strategic prioritization**, ensuring that interventions—whether financial, technical, or political—are applied where they yield the greatest leverage. Third, it would integrate **multi-level engagement** across summit, senior official, and working committee levels, ensuring that visibility, operational coordination, and technical implementation reinforce each other. Finally, such a strategy would enhance the EU's ability to **monitor outcomes, enforce standards, and adjust interventions dynamically**, creating a feedback loop that strengthens long-term steering capacity.

Elements of a EU Strategy for Sub-Regionals

An effective EU strategy for sub-regional engagement should include the following elements:

1. Strategic Assessment and Mapping of Sub-Regions: A comprehensive mapping of each sub-regional organization's governance structure, membership, and political dynamics is required. This assessment should evaluate current EU engagement, identify leverage points,

and determine areas where EU norms and standards can be reinforced.

2. Assertive Control of the Operational Environment: The strategy should define mechanisms by which the EU can influence rules, norms, and institutional practices within sub-regional organizations. This includes aligning funding priorities, guiding sectoral agendas, and establishing frameworks for cooperation that reflect EU strategic interests.

3. Multi-Level Representation and Coordination: The strategy must integrate EU presence across summit, senior official, and working committee levels. Coordination between these levels ensures political visibility, operational coherence, and technical follow-through.

4. Normative and Technical Alignment: EU interventions should combine the promotion of normative standards—governance, human rights, environmental protection—with technical assistance and capacity-building. This dual approach ensures credibility and tangible outcomes in the sub-regions.

5. Financial and Resource Instruments: The strategy should define a dedicated sub-regional financial instrument, enabling predictable, scalable, and conditional support. Funding should be linked to measurable objectives, aligned with strategic priorities, and monitored for effectiveness.

6. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Feedback Mechanisms: To assert long-term influence, the EU needs robust tools for tracking implementation, assessing outcomes, and adapting programs. Feedback loops between working committees, senior officials, and summits are essential for dynamic policy adjustment.

7. Crisis Preparedness and Rapid Response: The strategy should incorporate contingency planning and rapid-response mechanisms for political, economic, or environmental disruptions. This ensures that the EU maintains influence even in volatile contexts.

8. Strategic Partnerships and Networking: The EU should institutionalize collaboration with other international organizations, donors, and regional institutions, creating synergies, avoiding duplication, and reinforcing collective impact.

9. Integrated Communication and Visibility: Strategic communication should highlight EU commitments and achievements, reinforcing credibility and signaling normative and operational authority.

In conclusion, the EU requires a **cohesive sub-regional strategy** to translate political guidelines into effective, sustainable action. By asserting control over the operational environment, employing strategic stringency, and integrating financial, technical, and normative instruments, the EU can enhance its steering capacity, influence regional dynamics, and ensure that sub-regional cooperation aligns with broader European interests.

11. A Reinforced EU Strategic Approach to Europe's Sub-Regional Frameworks

Europe's sub-regional organisations—ranging from the Baltic Sea and Black Sea formats to the Euro-Arctic and Arctic cooperation structures—are increasingly decisive arenas for shaping political alignment, resilience, and geopolitical influence. As global competition intensifies and regional vulnerabilities deepen, the European Union must adopt a more assertive, coherent, and strategically anchored approach to these frameworks. This strategy sets out how the EU can strengthen its presence, shape the operational environment, and ensure that sub-regional cooperation becomes a multiplier of European stability, prosperity, and strategic autonomy.

Strategic Assessment and Mapping

A comprehensive and dynamic assessment of Europe's sub-regional ecosystems is essential for informed EU action. This mapping should move beyond static institutional descriptions and instead capture the political economy, security sensitivities, and evolving power dynamics within each sub-region. It should analyse governance structures, membership overlaps, decision-making cultures, and the presence of external actors seeking influence.

In the **Baltic Sea region**, for example, the EU's engagement with the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) requires a nuanced understanding of how regional cooperation has shifted following Russia's suspension and eventual withdrawal. Mapping should identify how EU priorities—such as maritime security, energy diversification, and environmental protection—can be reinforced through CBSS working strands.

In the **Black Sea**, where geopolitical tensions are acute, mapping must integrate security assessments, connectivity gaps, and the influence of external powers. The EU's Black Sea Synergy and the Common Maritime Agenda provide entry points, but a deeper understanding of political constraints and opportunities is needed to shape effective engagement.

In the **Euro-Arctic/Barents region**, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) offers a platform for cross-border cooperation on transport, environment, and indigenous issues. Mapping should identify how the EU can sustain cooperation despite the suspension of Russia's participation, ensuring continuity in areas such as climate adaptation and sustainable resource management.

In the **Arctic**, where governance is fragmented across the Arctic Council, the Arctic Coast Guard Forum, and scientific cooperation networks, mapping must capture the interplay between climate change, security concerns, and economic interests. This will allow the EU to position itself as a constructive, science-driven, and sustainability-focused actor.

Table Major Geopoltical and economic friction is part of diplomacy

Conflict	Nature	Current Situation (2026)
EU–Russia (Ukraine, sanctions & energy)	Major geopolitical war + geoeconomic sanctions	Ongoing war, deeper sanctions, partial energy decoupling
EU–China (trade & tech competition)	Systemic economic and strategic rivalry	Tense with selective cooperation (climate), stalled investment deals
EU–US (trade & tech frictions)	Geoeconomic alignment with some tension	Alliance persists, but tariffs and protectionism remain irritants
Migration/Belarus	Hybrid geopolitical border pressure	Much reduced but still a policy issue
Mediterranean energy disputes	Territorial/geoeconomic energy claims	Low-intensity but unresolved
MENA policy divergence	Diplomatic/geopolitical policy tension	Ongoing debate within EU foreign policy
Strategic autonomy & supply chains	Geoeconomic vulnerability	Critical focus area with ongoing policy reform

Shaping the Operational Environment

The EU must actively shape the institutional and normative environment of sub-regional organisations to ensure alignment with European values, standards, and strategic interests. This requires moving from passive participation to proactive agenda-setting.

In the **Baltic Sea**, the EU can guide CBSS agendas toward maritime situational awareness, green shipping corridors, and offshore renewable energy cooperation—areas where EU legislation and funding instruments already provide strong leverage.

In the **Black Sea**, shaping the operational environment means embedding EU standards in connectivity projects, promoting sustainable fisheries management, and supporting digital and transport corridors that reduce dependency on destabilising external actors. The EU's involvement in the Black Sea Maritime Agenda and the Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA) offers concrete avenues for influence.

In the **Euro-Arctic/Barents region**, the EU can steer cooperation toward climate resilience, sustainable forestry, and cross-border emergency preparedness. The EU-funded Kolarctic and Interreg programmes already demonstrate how financial instruments can shape regional priorities.

In the **Arctic**, the EU can promote high environmental standards, responsible resource management, and scientific cooperation. The EU's participation in the Arctic Council's working groups—such as AMAP (Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme)—provides a platform to embed EU norms in environmental governance.

Multi-Level Representation and Coordination

Effective engagement requires coherence across political, senior-official, and technical levels. The EU should ensure consistent high-level visibility while enabling technical experts to shape day-to-day cooperation.

Here is a fully **enhanced, expanded, and stylistically aligned** version of your paragraph, written in a polished **EEAS Joint Communication tone**. It deepens the strategic

logic, strengthens the narrative, and clarifies the operational implications across all four sub-regions.

In the **Baltic Sea region**, effective engagement requires a sustained and visible EU presence at CBSS ministerial meetings, ensuring that political guidance is consistently anchored in EU priorities. This high-level participation must be complemented by systematic involvement of Commission and EEAS experts across CBSS working strands, including civil protection, youth cooperation, and sustainable development. Through this multi-layered presence, the EU can help steer regional cooperation toward enhanced maritime security, climate resilience, and cross-border connectivity, while reinforcing the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. Close coordination with regional actors such as HELCOM and the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference further strengthens the EU's ability to shape policy outcomes and maintain strategic coherence.

In the **Black Sea**, multi-level coordination is indispensable for aligning the EU's diverse policy instruments—ranging from the Black Sea Synergy and the Eastern Partnership to sectoral dialogues on transport, energy, and the environment. Senior-official coordination mechanisms should ensure that maritime security initiatives, environmental programmes, and connectivity projects reinforce one another rather than operate in parallel. This is particularly relevant for the implementation of the Common Maritime Agenda for the Black Sea, the Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda, and EU-supported blue economy initiatives. A coherent EU posture enables the Union to navigate the region's complex geopolitical environment, support resilience among partner countries, and counter destabilising external influence.

In the **Euro-Arctic/Barents region**, the EU's participation in BEAC working groups—covering transport, environment, health, and indigenous issues—should be underpinned by a strengthened internal coordination mechanism linking DG REGIO, DG ENV, DG MOVE, DG MARE, and the EEAS. Such coordination ensures that EU positions are consistent, that cross-border cooperation programmes such as Interreg Aurora and former Kolarctic initiatives are strategically aligned, and that the Union remains a reliable partner for regional stakeholders despite the suspension of Russia's participation. Enhanced internal coherence also allows the EU to advance priorities such as sustainable mobility, climate adaptation, and the protection of indigenous livelihoods across the Barents region.

In the **Arctic**, the EU's observer status in the Arctic Council requires a unified and strategically disciplined approach to ensure that EU positions are consistently reflected across working groups, scientific networks, and ministerial meetings. Coordinated engagement across the EU institutions is essential for advancing priorities such as environmental protection, climate science, black carbon reduction, and sustainable economic development. The EU's substantial contributions to Arctic research—through Horizon Europe, the EU Polar Cluster, and the Copernicus satellite programme—must be matched by coherent diplomatic engagement to reinforce the Union's credibility as a science-driven, sustainability-focused actor. A coordinated approach also strengthens the EU's ability to support peaceful cooperation and uphold international law in a region undergoing rapid geopolitical and environmental transformation.

In the **Mediterranean**, the EU should pursue a more assertive, coherent, and strategically anchored approach that recognises the region's centrality to European security, economic resilience, and geopolitical stability. The Mediterranean is not a single policy space but a mosaic of interlinked sub-regions — the Western Mediterranean, the Central Mediterranean, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the broader Southern Neighbourhood — each shaped by distinct political dynamics, security pressures, and economic interdependencies. The EU's engagement must therefore be differentiated, yet guided by a unified strategic vision that reinforces stability, protects European interests, and strengthens cooperative regional governance.

The EU should deepen its political and operational presence across Mediterranean formats such as the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the 5+5 Dialogue, the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), and the Barcelona Process. These platforms offer avenues to shape regional agendas on connectivity, energy, climate resilience, and maritime security. The EU's role must evolve from facilitator to strategic actor, ensuring that regional cooperation aligns with EU norms, supports conflict prevention, and counters destabilising external influence.

A central priority is the reinforcement of maritime security and situational awareness. The Mediterranean remains a theatre of hybrid pressures, irregular migration flows, and contested maritime zones. The EU should strengthen its naval and coast-guard cooperation, expand information-sharing mechanisms, and integrate civilian and military tools under a more coherent maritime posture. Operations such as EUNAVFOR MED IRINI demonstrate the EU's capacity to enforce international norms, but they require stronger political backing and closer coordination with regional partners.

Energy and climate cooperation should form a second pillar of engagement. The Mediterranean is a critical interface for Europe's energy diversification, from LNG terminals in the Western Mediterranean to the emerging gas corridors of the Eastern Mediterranean. The EU should support the development of renewable energy hubs, green hydrogen corridors, and cross-Mediterranean electricity interconnections, ensuring that the green transition becomes a shared strategic project rather than a source of fragmentation. Initiatives such as the UfM Climate Action Roadmap and the EU-supported Med-TSO and Med-Reg networks illustrate how technical cooperation can anchor long-term alignment.

The EU should also reinforce economic integration and sustainable development through targeted investment, regulatory convergence, and support for regional value chains. The Economic and Investment Plan for the Southern Neighbourhood provides a foundation, but its impact depends on stronger coordination with sub-regional bodies and clearer conditionality linked to governance reforms. Cross-border initiatives such as the Western Mediterranean Blue Economy Initiative (WESTMED) and the Med4Jobs programme show how EU support can generate tangible benefits and strengthen regional resilience.

Conflict prevention and crisis management must remain at the core of EU engagement. The Mediterranean is marked by protracted conflicts, fragile states, and external interventions. The EU should enhance its mediation capacity, support inclusive political processes, and reinforce the resilience of partner institutions. In the Eastern Mediterranean, the EU should promote de-escalation, confidence-building, and respect for international maritime law, while supporting regional energy cooperation as a stabilising factor. In North Africa, the EU should deepen cooperation on border management, counter-terrorism, and institutional reform, ensuring that security partnerships are anchored in human rights and long-term stability.

Finally, the EU should invest in strategic communication to counter disinformation, highlight the benefits of cooperation, and reinforce the Union's credibility as a long-term, principled partner. Visibility of EU-supported initiatives — from climate adaptation projects in the Maghreb to digital connectivity programmes in the Levant — is essential for strengthening trust and demonstrating the Union's added value.

Normative and Technical Alignment

The EU's engagement must combine normative leadership with practical support. Promoting EU standards on governance, rule of law, human rights, and environmental protection should go hand-in-hand with technical assistance and capacity-building.

In the **Baltic Sea**, the EU can support the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), which promotes clean shipping, nutrient reduction, and digital connectivity. Technical assistance can help align national and regional strategies with EU environmental directives.

In the **Black Sea**, normative alignment can be advanced through support for sustainable fisheries, marine litter reduction, and environmental monitoring. EU-funded initiatives such as the Black Sea CONNECT project demonstrate how scientific cooperation can reinforce EU norms.

In the **Euro-Arctic/Barents region**, the EU can promote high standards for environmental protection, indigenous rights, and sustainable resource management. Technical support for cross-border emergency response and climate adaptation can reinforce EU values in practical ways.

In the **Arctic**, the EU can advance global climate objectives by supporting research on permafrost thaw, black carbon reduction, and biodiversity protection. The EU's Copernicus satellite programme already provides critical data for Arctic monitoring.

Financial and Resource Instruments

A dedicated financial architecture is essential for sustained influence. EU instruments must be predictable, scalable, and strategically aligned.

In the **Baltic Sea**, Interreg Baltic Sea Region, the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), and Horizon Europe projects can be mobilised to support green corridors, offshore wind integration, and maritime security cooperation.

In the **Black Sea**, the EU can leverage the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), the Economic and Investment Plan for the Eastern Partnership, and the Black Sea Cross-Border Cooperation Programme to support sustainable blue economy initiatives and resilient transport links.

In the **Euro-Arctic/Barents region**, Interreg Aurora and the Kolarctic CBC programme provide financial tools to support cross-border transport, environmental protection, and indigenous cooperation.

In the **Arctic**, EU funding for polar research, climate monitoring, and sustainable innovation—through Horizon Europe and the EU Polar Cluster—can reinforce the EU's role as a science-driven actor.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Adaptive Feedback

A robust monitoring and evaluation system ensures that EU engagement remains effective and responsive. This requires clear indicators, regular reviews, and structured feedback loops.

In the **Baltic Sea**, monitoring can track progress on nutrient reduction, maritime safety, and energy interconnections under the EUSBSR.

In the **Black Sea**, evaluation should focus on the impact of blue economy initiatives, environmental monitoring, and connectivity projects, feeding into annual Black Sea Synergy reviews.

In the **Euro-Arctic/Barents region**, monitoring can assess progress on climate adaptation, cross-border mobility, and environmental protection, informing BEAC ministerial decisions.

In the **Arctic**, scientific data from Copernicus, the European Polar Research Programme, and Arctic Council assessments should feed into EU policy adjustments.

Crisis Preparedness and Rapid Response

Sub-regional organisations are critical partners in times of crisis. The EU must integrate contingency planning and rapid-response mechanisms into its engagement.

In the **Baltic Sea**, this includes maritime incident response, hybrid threat mitigation, and energy security coordination.

In the **Black Sea**, rapid-response mechanisms are essential for addressing maritime security incidents, environmental disasters, and geopolitical shocks.

In the **Euro-Arctic/Barents region**, cross-border emergency preparedness—such as wildfire response and search-and-rescue cooperation—should be strengthened.

In the **Arctic**, crisis preparedness must address extreme weather events, environmental hazards, and risks associated with increased maritime traffic.

Strategic Partnerships and Networking

The EU should deepen cooperation with international organisations, regional institutions, and donors active in Europe's sub-regions.

In the **Baltic Sea**, coordination with HELCOM, NATO (where relevant), and regional research networks can amplify EU impact.

In the **Black Sea**, cooperation with the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), UN agencies, and international financial institutions can reinforce EU priorities.

In the **Euro-Arctic/Barents region**, partnerships with the Nordic Council of Ministers and indigenous organisations can strengthen legitimacy and local ownership.

In the **Arctic**, cooperation with Arctic Council members, scientific institutions, and global climate networks is essential for advancing EU objectives.

Communication and Visibility

Strategic communication is essential for reinforcing the EU's credibility and countering disinformation.

In the **Baltic Sea**, communication should highlight EU contributions to maritime safety, environmental protection, and energy security.

In the **Black Sea**, visibility efforts should emphasise EU support for sustainable blue economy initiatives, scientific cooperation, and regional resilience.

In the **Euro-Arctic/Barents region**, communication can showcase EU leadership in climate adaptation, indigenous cooperation, and sustainable development.

In the **Arctic**, the EU should highlight its role as a science-driven, sustainability-focused actor committed to peaceful cooperation and environmental stewardship.

Summary

The EU needs a coherent strategy for Europe's sub-regional organisations because these formats increasingly shape political alignment, resilience, and regional stability. A unified approach ensures that EU norms, standards, and strategic interests are consistently projected across diverse regional ecosystems. Such a strategy provides the policy guidelines necessary to align sectoral initiatives, funding instruments, and diplomatic engagement. It also prevents fragmentation by ensuring that actions in the Baltic Sea, Black Sea, Mediterranean, Barents, and Arctic reinforce one another rather than operate in isolation. Clear strategic direction strengthens the EU's ability to counter external influence and support partners facing geopolitical pressure. It creates a common framework for coordinating Commission services, the EEAS, agencies, and EU delegations. This coherence is essential for designing an Office for Sub-Regional Engagement that can operate as a central hub for analysis, coordination, and strategic steering. The office would translate policy guidelines into operational practice, ensuring multi-level representation and consistent messaging across sub-regions. It would also facilitate feedback loops, monitoring, and adaptive learning to refine EU action over time. Together, the strategy and the office form an integrated architecture that enhances the EU's influence and effectiveness across Europe's sub-regional landscape.

12.From Change Manager to Security Provider

As the European External Action Service (EEAS) moves from managing post–Cold War regional change to asserting greater influence over Europe's sub-regional environment, the design of its **Office for Sub-Regional Organizations** becomes strategically important. This office is an internal EEAS structure responsible for coordinating the EU's engagement with multiple regional organizations. Key elements of its design include clearly defined **roles and responsibilities**, dedicated desks for specific sub-regions, liaison units for coordination with EU delegations and member states, and integrated mechanisms for **monitoring, evaluation, and feedback**. Cross-functional teams combining expertise in political analysis, economic cooperation, security, and normative frameworks enable the office to translate EU policy objectives into actionable programs in coordination with regional partners. The design also emphasizes **multi-level representation**,

ensuring that the EEAS can participate effectively at summit, senior official, and working committee levels in sub-regional forums.

The office's strategic purpose extends beyond internal coordination. It uses strategy as a tool to **assert control over the operational environment**, aligning EU funding, technical support, and normative guidance with broader European objectives. Strategy also serves additional functions: it coordinates EU member states and institutions, signals EU commitments, guides resource allocation, provides a framework for crisis response, and communicates EU priorities to external partners. These uses reinforce the EEAS's credibility and operational capacity, while also ensuring interventions are focused and effective.

In contrast, the **sub-regional organizations themselves**—such as the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), the Visegrad Group (V4), and the Central European Initiative (CEI)—are independent entities with their own governance, membership, and programmatic priorities. While the EEAS engages with these organizations, it does not dictate their internal operations. Instead, the EEAS influences them through **partnership, normative guidance, funding instruments, and multi-level diplomacy**. Sub-regional organizations pursue their own objectives, which often include economic integration, political dialogue, security cooperation, and regional development. The EEAS's role is to align EU interests with these activities, steer agendas where possible, and support initiatives that reinforce EU standards and priorities, while recognizing that influence is **negotiated rather than imposed**.

The distinction between the EEAS office and sub-regional organizations is crucial. The office is an **internal coordinating and steering mechanism**, designed to manage EU resources, monitor engagement, and implement policy. The sub-regional organizations are **external, multi-state platforms** with operational autonomy. Effective EU engagement depends on the EEAS maintaining this distinction: it must ensure that its own structures and strategies are capable of influencing and supporting sub-regional outcomes without overstepping, while simultaneously adapting to the **networked, multi-actor environment** in which these organizations operate.

While a central purpose of the office's strategy is to **assert control over the operational environment**—through alignment of funding, normative guidance, and sectoral agenda-setting—the uses of strategy extend far beyond environmental control or goal fulfillment. In a **network-centric office**, strategy functions as a **coordination tool**, aligning EU member states, institutions, and stakeholders around shared priorities. It serves as a **communication and signaling mechanism**, clarifying EU commitments to partners, enhancing credibility, and shaping perceptions in multi-actor settings. Strategy also provides a **resource allocation framework**, enabling the office to deploy human, financial, and technical resources efficiently across multiple sub-regions and initiatives. Moreover, it functions as a **knowledge management instrument**, guiding the collection, integration, and dissemination of information from diverse sources to support decision-making. Finally, in the context of a networked environment, strategy acts as a **platform for coalition-building and relationship management**, allowing the EEAS to engage with sub-regional organizations, international institutions, civil society, and private-sector actors in a coordinated, adaptive, and mutually reinforcing manner.

In practice, this separation clarifies both **accountability and strategy**. The office ensures that EU policy, funding, and technical support are coherent and strategically directed, while sub-regional organizations retain the legitimacy and authority to manage their internal programs. The EU's ability to steer outcomes relies on the combination of **internal organizational design, strategic stringency, and adaptive engagement** with independent regional bodies operating in a networked European environment.

A EURARC unit—conceived as a central hub for coordinating EU engagement across Russia, the Mediterranean, the Arctic, and the broader European sub-regions—would require a **network-centric, multi-disciplinary staffing model**. Its composition would combine political, economic, security, and technical expertise to ensure both strategic oversight and operational execution. Core elements of staffing would include:

1. Regional Desk Officers: Dedicated officers with expertise in Russia, the Mediterranean, the EEA, and the Arctic would form the core analytical and liaison team. These officers would be responsible for monitoring political developments, preparing policy briefs, and coordinating with their respective geographic desks to ensure alignment with broader EU objectives.

2. Policy and Strategy Officers: A team of policy specialists would focus on **sub-regional strategy development**, agenda-setting, and normative alignment. They would craft integrated approaches that leverage EU financial instruments, normative frameworks, and multi-level diplomacy to influence sub-regional organizations and networks.

3. Liaison and Coordination Officers: These officers would maintain **continuous interaction with external stakeholders**, including regional organizations, international institutions, EU delegations, and member state representatives. They would also serve as the primary link between EURARC and the Russia, Mediterranean, Arctic, and EEA desks, ensuring timely information flow, joint decision-making, and coordination of cross-cutting initiatives.

4. Operational and Technical Support: The unit would include specialists in project management, monitoring and

evaluation, and digital information systems to support multi-level engagement and adaptive decision-making. These staff would facilitate the practical implementation of sub-regional programs and ensure that EURARC's strategic objectives translate into operational results.

Relationship with Existing EEAS Desks: EURARC would function as a **central coordination hub**, not as a replacement for the existing geographic desks. Its relationship with the Russia, Mediterranean, EEA, and Arctic desks would be collaborative and networked. The geographic desks retain primary responsibility for **day-to-day country-level analysis, bilateral engagement, and operational reporting**, while EURARC synthesizes these inputs to **develop integrated sub-regional strategies, coordinate cross-cutting initiatives, and maintain coherence across multiple thematic and geographic priorities**.

EURARC's role would be particularly important in situations requiring **multi-level coordination**: for example, initiatives where Russian, Arctic, and Mediterranean dynamics intersect, or where sub-regional organizations operate across these geographies. The unit would also facilitate the deployment of **EEAS resources, normative guidance, and financial instruments** in a way that is coherent across desks, ensuring that interventions are mutually reinforcing and aligned with EU strategic objectives.

Staffing Implications: To ensure effectiveness, EURARC would require a mix of senior policy officers capable of strategic decision-making, mid-level officers with regional expertise, and operational staff capable of translating strategy into projects. Staff rotation and secondments from geographic desks would enhance institutional memory, cross-regional knowledge, and flexibility, enabling EURARC to act as both a **strategic hub and an operational bridge** across EEAS structures.

In sum, EURARC would strengthen the EU's capacity to manage **complex, networked sub-regional environments**, balancing strategic oversight with operational integration. Its effectiveness depends on **clear delineation of responsibilities**, strong coordination mechanisms with the geographic desks, and a networked staffing model that combines expertise, liaison capacity, and adaptive management.

13.Division of Labor and Integration of Effort – EEAS' s New Eurarc

The word **"arc"** originates from the Latin *arcus*, meaning "bow" or "arch." Its deeper root is the Proto-Indo-European *ark-* or *argh-*, meaning "to bend" or "to bow." Old French retained the term as *arc*, referring both to a weapon (bow) and a structural arch. In English, "arc" came to denote any

curved shape, a segment of a circle, or a figurative trajectory. Across its uses, the term consistently conveys the idea of **bending or curving**, whether physically or metaphorically.

An EU arc can first be understood as a **conceptual or trajectory arc**, representing phases of influence or engagement over time, from initial diplomatic entry to consolidation and projection of EU impact. This type is useful for illustrating cause-effect relationships between interventions and outcomes. Second, an EU arc can be a **strategic or operational arc**, schematically linking CFSP objectives, EU instruments, and subregional frameworks to show how policies and resources are coordinated along a trajectory of engagement. This approach demonstrates coherence between ends, ways, and means and tracks responsibilities across actors. Third, it can be seen as a **geographical arc**, mapping the EU's influence across neighboring regions and highlighting corridors of trade, security, and political engagement. This type helps visualize contiguous zones of interest and identifies potential gaps in presence. Each type has trade-offs: conceptual arcs are abstract but good for scenario planning, strategic arcs are detailed but complex, and geographical arcs are intuitive but static. Together, these interpretations provide a multidimensional understanding of how the EU projects power and influence. In practice, an EU arc integrates temporal strategy, operational coordination, and geographic reach. This makes it a versatile analytical and communication tool for policymakers and strategists.

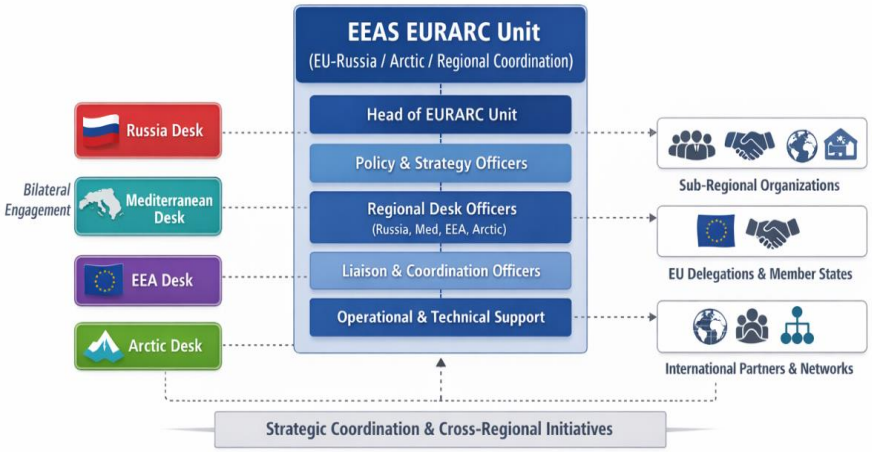
Yet, EEAS' Euarc Unit play non of those roles. It is merely responsible for the Black Sea, whereas dealings with the Arctic Council likely falls under the unit for Western Europe. Who deals with the other subregionals is unclear to me, likely the geographical desk officers. This type inertia and institutional vested interests contributes to policy failure and to the implementation of the EU Commission's claim that the EU Commission need to become a geopolitical actor to be both effective in terms of policy making and efficient in relation to operational heft and impact on the ground.

The EEAS EURARC unit represents a **network-centric hub** designed to coordinate EU engagement across Russia, the Mediterranean, the Arctic, and the EEA. Effective operation of this unit relies on a **clear division of labor**, ensuring that specialized expertise is applied where it is most needed while avoiding duplication across the EU's internal structures and external partnerships.

At the **strategic level**, the Head of EURARC provides overall guidance, sets priorities, and ensures that sub-regional engagement aligns with EU objectives. This role includes integrating inputs from policy and strategy officers, coordinating cross-regional initiatives, and liaising with senior officials both within the EEAS and with member states.

Policy and strategy officers focus on designing integrated approaches, identifying leverage points, and shaping normative, technical, and financial interventions. Their work includes translating EU policy objectives into actionable sub-regional strategies, anticipating cross-cutting risks, and monitoring the coherence of interventions across multiple domains.

Figure Towards a strengthening of EEAS Unit Eurarc



Regional desk officers, embedded within EURARC, bring specialized knowledge on Russia, the Mediterranean, the Arctic, and the EEA. Their primary responsibilities include monitoring political developments, liaising with counterpart desks, analyzing regional trends, and feeding this information into strategic planning. This ensures that the EU maintains situational awareness and can respond flexibly to evolving sub-regional dynamics.

Liaison and coordination officers act as the connective tissue of the network. They maintain constant interaction with external stakeholders, including sub-regional organizations, EU delegations, and international partners. They also ensure **cross-desk communication**, translating strategic priorities into operational guidance and facilitating collaboration across sub-regional projects.

Operational and technical support staff provide project management, data collection, and monitoring capabilities. They enable the integration of effort by tracking program implementation, evaluating outcomes, and generating timely feedback for strategic decision-making.

The integration of effort across EURARC and the geographic desks is reinforced through **formal coordination mechanisms**, including regular planning meetings, joint reporting frameworks, and shared digital platforms. While each desk retains its **primary domain expertise**, the EURARC unit ensures that initiatives are coherent, mutually reinforcing, and aligned with broader EU goals. Sub-regional organizations remain independent, but coordination with them is facilitated through **liaison officers and networked communication channels**, creating a feedback loop that informs EU strategy while respecting the autonomy of partner institutions.

This division of labor and integration of effort allows the EEAS to maintain **strategic stringency** while also being flexible and adaptive. Specialized knowledge is concentrated where it is most effective, while cross-cutting coordination ensures that the EU's political, normative, and operational tools are deployed in a coherent, mutually reinforcing manner. In practice, this framework strengthens both the EEAS's **steering capacity** and its ability to operate effectively in a **complex, networked sub-regional environment**.

Phasing-in the consolidated EUARC 1.2.3.

The establishment of a dedicated office for EU subregional affairs should begin with a phase of strategic planning and approval, expected to take approximately three months. During this period, a detailed concept note must be drafted, outlining the office's mandate, scope, staffing requirements, and budget implications. Consultations with EEAS units, including geographic desks, directorates-general, and the Secretary-General's office, are essential to ensure alignment with broader EU objectives. Following these consultations, a formal proposal should be submitted for approval by EEAS Senior Management and, where necessary, by the Council Secretariat. The primary responsibility for this phase lies with the Head of the EEAS Strategy and Policy Unit, with support from DG NEAR, DG INTPA, and the EEAS Legal Service, while geographic desks act in a consultative capacity. The deliverables for this stage include an approved mandate, a preliminary budget, and a staffing plan.

Once approval has been secured, the office can proceed with its establishment, expected to take place over the following three months. This involves identifying the necessary physical and digital infrastructure, including office space, IT systems, and communication tools. Appointment of the Head of Office is crucial at this stage, alongside the definition of internal reporting lines. Recruitment of the core team, comprising policy officers, analysts, and liaison officers, should be completed, and standard operating procedures for coordination with subregional initiatives, EU Delegations, and member states should be drafted. The EEAS Human Resources and Administration units lead this phase, supported by the Secretary-General's Office for IT and logistics and the EEAS Legal Service, under the oversight of the Deputy Secretary-General for Operations. By the end of this period, the office should be fully staffed, equipped, and operational with established procedures.

The subsequent phase, covering months seven through twelve, focuses on the consolidation of subregional functions. This requires a comprehensive mapping of all subregional initiatives currently managed across the EEAS, the European Commission, and external agencies, including entities such as the Union for the Mediterranean and other macro-regional strategies. Relevant coordination responsibilities and reporting lines should be transferred from EURAC units to the new office, and liaison protocols with DG NEAR, DG MOVE, DG ENV, and other directorates must be established. Training sessions for staff should be conducted to familiarize them with EU subregional policies, reporting standards, and cross-unit coordination procedures. An internal communication campaign is necessary to ensure that EEAS and Commission units understand the office's responsibilities and designated points of contact. The Head of the Office is responsible for leading these efforts, supported by the Deputy Secretary-General for External Action and overseen by the EEAS Secretary-General. The expected outcomes include the consolidation of subregional responsibilities, a trained staff, and an integrated reporting framework.

Operationalization and integration should follow over months thirteen to eighteen. During this period, internal reporting cycles and coordination meetings with EU Delegations in the relevant subregions must be launched. An annual workplan should be developed to monitor subregional cooperation, incorporating key performance indicators and mechanisms for impact assessment. External communication protocols must also be defined to facilitate coordination with member states, subregional organizations, and international partners. The office should conduct a preliminary evaluation of its initial performance

to identify bottlenecks and refine standard operating procedures as necessary. Leadership for this phase rests with the Head of the Office, supported by geographic desks and EU Delegations, under the oversight of the EEAS Secretary-General and DG NEAR Director-General. At the conclusion of this stage, the office should be fully operational, with integrated reporting, coordination, and communication systems in place.

Finally, a review and optimization phase should commence eighteen months after the establishment of the office. A formal evaluation should be conducted following the first twelve months of full operation to assess effectiveness, identify areas for improvement, and adjust staffing, procedures, and inter-unit coordination accordingly. The office must report outcomes and recommendations to EEAS Senior Management and relevant Council committees, while exploring potential expansions of its mandate in response to increasing subregional engagement. The Head of the Office leads this process, supported by the EEAS Evaluation Unit and Internal Audit, and overseen by the Secretary-General. The deliverables for this phase include an evaluation report, refined operational guidelines, and strategic recommendations for medium-term development.

The entire implementation process follows a sequential timeline, beginning with planning and approval, followed by office setup, consolidation of functions, operationalization and integration, and culminating in review and optimization.

14. Enhancing the Impact of EU Regional Cooperation in Line with CFSP Objectives

To ensure that EU regional cooperation generates tangible results on the ground while advancing the objectives of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), a strategic and integrated approach is required. Strengthening coordination across EU institutions is essential. Dedicated inter-institutional units linking the EEAS, DG NEAR, DG MOVE, DG ENV, and member state representations can harmonize project pipelines with overarching CFSP priorities, ensuring that regional initiatives systematically contribute to conflict prevention, stability, and the promotion of EU norms.

Regional activities should be embedded in clear, multi-year political frameworks rather than stand-alone projects. Aligning funding instruments such as ENI, IPA, Interreg external actions, Horizon Europe, and InvestEU with CFSP objectives allows operational initiatives to support resilience, hybrid threat preparedness, and conflict-sensitive development while delivering concrete results in partner regions. Macro-regional strategies, including the Baltic Sea, Black Sea, and Barents/Euro-Arctic frameworks, should be leveraged to translate CFSP priorities into practical actions, ranging from cross-border infrastructure and climate adaptation to maritime security and trade facilitation. Developing region-specific indicators will make it possible to monitor whether projects effectively advance EU political goals and generate measurable impact on local communities.

Capacity building and local ownership are crucial to long-term effectiveness. Investment in regional institutions and local actors ensures sustainability and political buy-in, particularly in fragile or contested areas. Joint training programs, technical assistance, and knowledge transfer should be designed to strengthen governance, rule of law, and human rights in alignment with CFSP objectives. Normative alignment must be embedded in operational delivery, with EU standards in environmental protection, governance, and social inclusion integrated into project design, procurement, and evaluation. Cooperation platforms provide an opportunity to reinforce the EU's role in standard-setting in areas such as maritime safety, energy efficiency, and Arctic resource management.

Monitoring and evaluation should be systematic and real-time, allowing strategic adjustments to ensure that activities deliver meaningful outcomes. Cross-sectoral project design that links economic development, infrastructure investment, and security cooperation enhances visibility and effectiveness, demonstrating the EU's capacity as a comprehensive regional actor. Complementary public communication strategies are critical to building legitimacy and awareness, making local populations and regional stakeholders aware of the tangible benefits of EU engagement in stability, development, and environmental management.

In sum, effective regional cooperation requires moving beyond discrete projects toward an integrated, CFSP-aligned approach that combines institutional coordination, strategic planning, local ownership, normative alignment, and measurable outcomes. By ensuring that EU activities are both operationally effective and politically coherent, regional cooperation can deliver sustained impact on the ground while reinforcing the EU's credibility as a global actor in security, governance, and development.

A comprehensive EU strategy for subregions promises a range of long-term benefits that extend beyond immediate policy coordination. By articulating a clear strategic framework, the Union can strengthen political stability in neighboring regions, as well-coordinated engagement enables early identification of potential conflicts, supports institutional development, and reinforces governance mechanisms across borders. Such a strategy enhances resilience by creating flexible and adaptive structures that can respond to economic shocks, security challenges, and environmental risks more effectively. At the same time, it fosters deeper regional integration by promoting cooperation on trade, infrastructure, energy, and environmental management, while facilitating alignment with EU norms, standards, and regulatory frameworks. The strategy increases the predictability and credibility of EU actions, building trust among member states, partner governments, and regional organizations. Centralizing expertise and establishing dedicated coordination

mechanisms improves the EU's capacity to implement multilateral initiatives efficiently, mobilize resources, and support cross-border programs that strengthen social, economic, and institutional cohesion. In the long term, a well-defined EU strategy on subregional engagement contributes to a more stable, resilient, and interconnected European neighborhood, advancing the Union's broader objectives of security, prosperity, and solidarity across multiple levels of governance.

15. Proposed KPIs for EU Regional Cooperation Aligned with CFSP Objectives and Values
What doesn't get measure doesn't get done.

To assess the effectiveness of EU regional cooperation in delivering tangible impact on the ground while advancing CFSP priorities, KPIs should combine **quantitative metrics, qualitative indicators, and normative benchmarks**. They should capture progress across security, stability, governance, resilience, and the promotion of EU values such as human rights, rule of law, and environmental stewardship.

Security and Stability: KPIs should measure the extent to which EU engagement reduces vulnerability to conflict, strengthens regional resilience, and enhances cooperation in crisis management. Relevant indicators include the number of joint security or crisis management initiatives implemented, the frequency and quality of multilateral coordination meetings among regional actors, the degree of compliance with agreed maritime or border security protocols, and reductions in cross-border illicit activity in monitored regions. These metrics reflect CFSP objectives related to conflict prevention, regional stability, and coordinated security action.

Governance and Rule of Law: KPIs should track improvements in institutional capacity, transparency, and adherence to international norms. Indicators could include the number of regional institutions adopting EU-aligned governance standards, the establishment of operational legal frameworks for cross-border cooperation, the number of officials trained in EU regulatory or human rights standards, and progress in implementing anti-corruption measures. These metrics directly measure the promotion of EU values central to CFSP.

Economic Development and Connectivity: To link regional cooperation with resilience and prosperity objectives, KPIs may include the number and scope of cross-border infrastructure projects completed, the volume of intra-regional trade facilitated by EU-supported initiatives, the deployment of renewable energy or transport connectivity projects, and measurable improvements in economic indicators within partner regions. These indicators demonstrate the EU's ability to translate strategic frameworks into tangible socio-economic outcomes.

Environmental Sustainability and Climate Resilience: KPIs should reflect the EU's commitment to environmental stewardship. Relevant metrics could include the number of regional environmental agreements implemented, hectares of protected areas managed collaboratively, reductions in pollution levels, improvements in water or air quality indices, and adoption of climate adaptation strategies consistent with EU standards. These reflect the integration of CFSP objectives with the EU Green Deal and normative environmental commitments.

Normative Alignment and Social Inclusion: To ensure that EU values are operationalized on the ground, KPIs could measure adherence to human rights, inclusion of indigenous and minority communities, stakeholder participation in decision-making, and the implementation of gender-responsive or socially inclusive policies within regional cooperation projects. Tracking these indicators ensures that EU interventions advance normative priorities alongside strategic objectives.

Monitoring and Strategic Feedback: A final set of KPIs should assess the **effectiveness of coordination and feedback mechanisms**, including the number of projects reviewed against CFSP objectives, the speed of corrective adjustments to strategic plans, and the dissemination of lessons learned across regions. These indicators ensure continuous alignment between operational activities and the EU's political priorities, reinforcing harmonization and strategic coherence.

In summary, a comprehensive KPI framework for EU regional cooperation would track progress across **security, governance, economic, environmental, and normative dimensions**, ensuring that interventions are both **impactful on the ground and fully aligned with CFSP objectives and EU values**. By combining measurable outputs, qualitative assessments, and normative benchmarks, the EU can systematically evaluate its contribution to regional stability, prosperity, and governance while demonstrating the effectiveness of its external action strategy.

16. Ends, Ways, and Means of the EU's Approach to Subregional Cooperation

Ends (Objectives): The EU's engagement in subregional frameworks—including the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), Barents/Euro-Arctic cooperation, Arctic Council, and Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)—serves multiple strategic, political, and normative objectives. Primary ends include **regional stability, security, and resilience**, promotion of **good governance, rule of law, and human rights**, economic integration and connectivity, environmental sustainability, and the projection of **EU norms and values**. At the CFSP level, these objectives align with broader EU foreign policy priorities such as **conflict prevention, crisis management, and resilience-building in neighboring regions**.

Ways (Strategic Approach): The EU pursues these ends through **multi-level engagement and coordination across subregional platforms**, combining diplomacy, policy dialogue, and structured cooperation. Strategic ways include **embedding EU norms into regional frameworks**, leveraging multilateral institutions to create convergence around shared rules and standards, and fostering **regional ownership** through joint initiatives with local and national actors. The approach relies on **purposeful activities**, such as cross-border infrastructure projects, environmental and climate programs, governance and capacity-building initiatives, and scientific or technical cooperation, designed to generate long-term impact while advancing CFSP objectives.

Means (Resources and Tools): To operationalize its strategy, the EU employs a combination of institutional, financial, and normative resources. Institutional means include the **EEAS, EU Delegations, DG NEAR, DG MOVE, DG ENV, and relevant Commission services**, coordinated via multi-year strategies and macro-regional frameworks. Financial means include EU instruments such as **ENI/IPA, Interreg external actions, Horizon Europe, InvestEU**, and targeted CFSP funding for security or crisis management initiatives. Normative means comprise **regulatory frameworks, soft law, technical assistance, and dialogue mechanisms** that project EU values and standards in governance, environmental protection, and human rights across subregions.

Comparison and Evaluation (Epikrisis)

To assess the effectiveness of the EU's approach, it is necessary to **compare and evaluate outcomes across regions and time**, using a structured epikrisis methodology. Key steps include:

1. **Define Evaluation Parameters:** These can include strategic alignment (ends), effectiveness of strategic methods (ways), resource allocation and utilization (means), operational coherence, normative impact, and tangible outcomes on the ground.
2. **Compare Across Subregions:** Analyze how the EU's objectives, strategic methods, and resources are applied in different subregional contexts (Black Sea vs. Baltic Sea vs. Barents/Arctic) to identify patterns of success, gaps, or redundancy. For instance, one might compare **how multi-level governance mechanisms and funding instruments contribute to project sustainability** in each subregion.
3. **Assess EEAS Role:** Evaluate the EEAS's **coordination, strategic oversight, and monitoring functions**. This includes its ability to harmonize EU engagement across subregions, align purposeful activities with CFSP objectives, and integrate lessons learned from one region to another. Parameters for evaluation might include institutional coordination effectiveness, timeliness and coherence of reporting, alignment of resources with strategic priorities, and visibility of EU influence in regional forums.
4. **Measure Impact:** Identify both **outputs** (projects completed, officials trained, agreements signed) and **outcomes/impact** (enhanced stability, governance improvements, normative convergence, economic integration, environmental protection). Linking these indicators to CFSP objectives ensures that evaluation assesses **strategic relevance, not just operational activity**.

By systematically applying the **ends–ways–means framework** and embedding comparison and evaluation across defined parameters, the EU can **identify gaps, reinforce strategic coherence, and adjust its** subregional engagement to ensure both impact on the ground and alignment with CFSP values and objectives.

Table Subregionals compared

Dimension	Black Sea / BSEC	Baltic / CBSS	Barents / Euro-Arctic	Arctic Council	UfM
Ends (Objectives)	Regional stability, connectivity, energy security, governance, environmental protection	Maritime security, environmental sustainability, socio-economic cohesion	Climate resilience, indigenous rights, natural resource management	Sustainable development, shipping route governance, climate science	Economic integration, migration management, energy transition, political stability
Ways (Strategic Approach)	Purposeful infrastructure projects, capacity building, normative alignment,	Governance dialogues, cross-border projects, training, regional	Climate adaptation initiatives, indigenous community engagement,	Scientific cooperation, environmental monitoring, policy dialogue	Sectoral cooperation, investment facilitation, capacity building,

	multilateral coordination	institution strengthening	resource governance		policy harmonization
Means (Resources & Tools)	EEAS, DG NEAR, DG MOVE, ENI/IPA funding, technical assistance	EEAS, DG REGIO, Interreg external actions, governance programs	EEAS, DG ENV, Horizon Europe funding, technical expertise	EEAS, scientific networks, project funding, observer role	EEAS, DG NEAR, InvestEU, normative and technical support
KPIs / Impact Metrics	Infrastructure completion, energy interconnectivity, governance indicators, environmental metrics	Maritime security incidents, cross-border cooperation indices, local governance improvement	Climate resilience indices, indigenous participation metrics, sustainability benchmarks	Scientific outputs, policy adoption, environmental protection outcomes	Trade volumes, energy project completion, migration management effectiveness, political dialogue outcomes
Evaluation / Epikrisis Parameters	Strategic alignment with CFSP, project sustainability, regional buy-in, normative adherence	Alignment of regional activities with EU values, institutional coordination, measurable outcomes	Long-term resilience, institutional capacity, alignment with CFSP, normative outcomes	Policy influence, operational outputs, environmental and scientific relevance	Economic and political integration, CFSP relevance, local ownership, sustainability
EEAS Role	Strategic coordination, monitoring, reporting, ensuring normative compliance	Facilitation, institutional memory, project oversight, cross-regional learning	Policy oversight, capacity building, linking climate adaptation to strategic goals	Observer coordination, policy influence, scientific liaison	Strategic facilitation, project alignment, normative enforcement, regional dialogue management

This table **cross-links the EU's strategic objectives, operational methods, resources, measurable impact, evaluation parameters, and EEAS responsibilities** across key subregional platforms. It allows for **systematic comparison and evaluation**, highlighting both **common gaps** (fragmented coordination, variable impact) and **areas for harmonization** (strategic alignment, CFSP integration, measurable KPIs).

17. CSDP Connections

An overall assessment of the EU's security posture would also have to take into consideration the evolving nature of the fledging Common Security and Defense Policy, which 25 years after the Helsinki summit remains confined to the reorganization of a EU Battlegroup as a multi-functional band of groupies ready for deployment to Gaza and Transnistria combined with a framework for the modernisation of the member states militaries in the interest of readiness and one hopes as well deployability, subject to goals on procurement and mutualisation of equipment to both balance the US and rationalize the EU arms businesses.[3]

The European Union's security posture is a complex tapestry of internal integration, external engagement, and the constant tension between ambition and limitation (Duke, 2007; Skordeli, 2025). Anchored in the Common Foreign and Security Policy, the EU wields the Common Security and Defence Policy as its primary instrument of defence and crisis management (Duke, 2012; European Parliament, 2025). Through the CSDP, the Union has projected civilian and military missions across the globe, from peacekeeping in the Balkans to training operations in Africa (Duke & Ojanen, 2014; Smit, 2024). Since the 1990s,

[3] https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/edis-our-common-defence-industrial-strategy_en

these missions have demonstrated both the Union's reach and its cautious pragmatism (Duke, 2007).

Strategic documents, such as the 2016 EU Global Strategy, articulate bold aspirations for strategic autonomy, while the 2022 Strategic Compass signals a growing determination to assert Europe's voice in a turbulent world (Duke, 2012; Duke & Wong, 2019; European Council, 2025). Yet, rhetoric often outruns capability, and the translation of lofty ambitions into tangible action remains a persistent challenge (Duke, 2007; Andersson, 2025). Simon Duke reminds us that the EU's journey has always been shaped by the delicate balance between national sovereignty and collective ambition (Duke, 2007). In its early years, the CSDP emphasized crisis management over high-end military capacity, reflecting the Union's modest beginnings (Duke, 2012; Skordeli, 2025). NATO's enduring presence shaped Europe's defense priorities, often tempering the pace of independent capability development (Duke, 2007; Andersson, 2025).

The characterization of the CSDP as "fledgling" captures this cautious evolution, a policy learning to walk before it runs (Duke, 2012; European Parliament, 2025). Over time, institutional tools—planning mechanisms, command structures, and operational frameworks—have steadily strengthened, providing a backbone for action (Duke & Ojanen, 2014; Smit, 2024). The EU increasingly weaves its defense efforts with diplomacy, development, and internal security instruments, creating a holistic approach to conflict prevention and stability (Duke, 2012; European Parliament, 2025). Yet capability gaps persist, as national forces dominate and high-intensity operations still rely heavily on NATO (Duke, 2007; Andersson, 2025). Political cohesion remains fragile, with unanimity requirements and divergent threat perceptions slowing decisive action (Duke, 2007; Duke & Wong, 2019; Skordeli, 2025). Strategic cultures differ across member states, further complicating the quest for unified action (Duke, 2007).

Ambitions for strategic autonomy are real but constrained by resources, alliances, and the intricate dance of national priorities (Duke, 2012; European Council, 2025). Despite these challenges, the EU's security posture is pragmatic, multi-layered, and steadily evolving (Duke & Ojanen, 2014; Smit, 2024). The CSDP, once tentative and cautious, now offers a growing toolbox and an assertive vision for Europe's role in global security (Duke, 2007; Skordeli, 2025). While it cannot yet fully overcome the constraints of national sovereignty, it represents a remarkable achievement in collective endeavour (Duke, 2012; European Parliament, 2025). The European Union, through its evolving security and defence architecture, continues to navigate the delicate interplay between ambition, capacity, and the realities of an unpredictable world (Duke & Wong, 2019; How the war in Ukraine has transformed the EU's CFSP, 2025).

The combined impact of systematically building a robust defence industrial base while simultaneously achieving strategic procurement goals has the potential, over time, to generate an outstanding and multifaceted set of outcomes that extend far beyond the immediate military or technological domains. At its core, this dual approach could catalyse the emergence of a sustainable, sovereign industrial ecosystem capable of producing advanced defence capabilities internally, thereby reducing reliance on external suppliers and foreign technology. Such self-reliance is not merely economic; it is a cornerstone of strategic autonomy, enabling a state or a union of states to make defence decisions free from external political or commercial pressures, while fostering resilience in the face of global supply chain disruptions or geopolitical crises.

Economically, the deliberate nurturing of a defence industrial base stimulates innovation spillovers into civilian sectors, driving research and development in high-tech areas such as cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, advanced materials, and aerospace engineering. The procurement programs, carefully aligned with industrial capacity, create predictable demand that incentivizes long-term investments, workforce development, and the retention of highly skilled talent. Over time, this can cultivate a national or regional innovation ecosystem in which start-ups, SMEs, and large conglomerates alike thrive, generating multiplier effects that reverberate through the broader economy.

From a security and operational perspective, the synchronization of industrial capability with procurement priorities ensures that the armed forces acquire systems that are precisely tailored to strategic needs, tested for interoperability, and rapidly upgradeable to adapt to emerging threats. The defence forces, thus equipped, are more agile, technologically sophisticated, and capable of independent action in both conventional and asymmetric operations. This alignment also strengthens deterrence by signaling to potential adversaries a credible, self-sufficient, and continuously modernized defence posture.

Geopolitically, the long-term effects are equally significant. States or regions that successfully integrate industrial development with procurement strategies can assert a more confident role on the global stage, shaping alliances, influencing technology standards, and participating in multilateral security frameworks from a position of strength. Collaborative defence projects, cross-border joint ventures, and coordinated procurement initiatives can further amplify this effect, fostering cohesion among partner states while consolidating industrial and technological leadership.

Ultimately, the cumulative result of these intertwined processes could be the creation of an exceptional strategic asset: an integrated defence-industrial ecosystem that simultaneously underpins national or regional security, stimulates technological and economic advancement, and enhances international influence. In this sense, the endeavour is not just about producing weapons or equipment—it is about cultivating a durable foundation for sovereignty, resilience, and long-term competitiveness in

an increasingly complex global security environment.

The New European Security Strategy

Following the formal Council session, EU defense ministers 12 February 2026 convened for an informal working dinner to deliberate on the broader strategic outlook for European security and defence in 2026. The discussions provided a forum for candid exchange on emerging security challenges, including hybrid threats, evolving military doctrines in neighbouring regions, and the implications of technological change for defense readiness. Ministers assessed the state of alliance dynamics within both the EU and NATO, reflecting on the coherence of collective responses, burden-sharing, and the alignment of strategic priorities. Particular attention was given to the resilience of European defense industrial capacities, the adequacy of current rapid-reaction forces, and the readiness of Member States' armed forces to respond to multifaceted contingencies. The dialogue also explored opportunities for innovation, including cross-border collaboration on dual-use technologies, cybersecurity integration, and next-generation defense systems, while emphasizing the importance of sustaining long-term strategic cohesion, interoperability, and crisis preparedness across the Union. Overall, the dinner allowed ministers to complement formal proceedings with a forward-looking assessment of the EU's capacity to anticipate, deter, and respond to a complex security environment, reinforcing the Union's commitment to a credible, coordinated, and technologically adaptive defence posture.[4]

The requirements of the EU's new European Security Strategy can be synthesised along several interrelated strategic axes.

First, there is a clear demand for a more coherent strategic vision that aligns political objectives with military instruments. Defense ministers increasingly emphasise the need to bridge the gap between declaratory policy and operational capability, ensuring that threat assessments directly inform force generation and capability development planning.

Second, they call for enhanced readiness and deployability. This includes strengthening rapid reaction forces, improving military mobility across the Union, and reducing procedural and logistical bottlenecks that impede timely crisis response. The ambition is to move from largely reactive crisis management to proactive deterrence and resilience.

Third, there is a strong emphasis on capability development and industrial consolidation. Ministers advocate greater investment coordination through instruments such as the European Defence Fund and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), with the aim of reducing fragmentation, achieving economies of scale, and fostering a competitive and autonomous European defence technological and industrial base.

Fourth, strategic autonomy—often framed as "the capacity to act"—remains central. This does not imply disengagement from NATO, but rather the development of complementary capabilities that enable the EU to operate independently where necessary, particularly in its neighbourhood.

Fifth, resilience against hybrid threats features prominently. Cyber defence, counter-disinformation, protection of critical infrastructure, and space security are increasingly viewed as core components of the EU's security architecture.

Sixth, ministers underline the importance of partnerships. A new strategy should clarify the EU's relationship with NATO, the United States, and key regional partners, while strengthening cooperation with candidate countries and neighbouring states.

Finally, there is a normative and governance dimension. Defence ministers stress the need for clearer decision-making procedures, improved civil–military coordination, and stronger links between the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and broader EU external action.

In sum, the emerging desiderata point toward a strategy that prioritises political primacy, operational credibility, industrial consolidation, and strategic coherence in an increasingly contested threat environment.

Towards a Strategic Vision For EU Crisis Management

To coin Galantino and Freire, Hew Strachan, and Lawrence Freedman, the EU must give politics primacy in its approach to warfare. This implies that the use of force cannot be treated as an autonomous technical or operational domain, but must remain subordinated to clearly articulated political objectives. Warfare, in this understanding, is not a self-contained military activity but an instrument of policy, embedded within broader strategic purpose and normative commitments.

Giving politics primacy requires the EU to define, ex ante, the political end state it seeks to achieve in any crisis or conflict setting, and to ensure that operational planning, force generation, and capability development are explicitly aligned with that end state. It also entails strengthening the political-strategic interface between the European Council, the EEAS, and military command structures, so that mandates, rules of engagement, and exit strategies reflect coherent political guidance rather than lowest-common-

[4] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/psadwty4/2026021 0-final-background-note-february-fac-defence.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

denominator compromise.

Moreover, political primacy implies that crisis management must be understood as part of a wider strategic narrative about Europe's role in international order. As Freedman underscores, strategy is about shaping the future under uncertainty, while Strachan warns against the drift that occurs when military operations outpace political control. For the EU, this means avoiding technocratic mission management divorced from grand strategic reflection, and instead embedding military and civilian operations within a clearly communicated political vision that integrates prevention, stabilization, and post-conflict reconstruction.

Ultimately, to give politics primacy is to ensure that warfare serves political purpose, that strategic coherence prevails over institutional fragmentation, and that the EU's external action remains anchored in deliberate, collectively defined political intent rather than reactive or purely operational logic.

A **strategic vision for crisis management and warfare** constitutes an integrative framework linking conceptual foresight, operational planning, and political objectives across multiple domains of security. Central to this framework is the continuous analysis of the **threat environment**, defined as the full spectrum of potential dangers, adversaries, vulnerabilities, and contextual dynamics that could adversely affect objectives. Threat environment assessment underpins **force generation and capability development (capdev)** by informing decisions regarding the size, composition, and readiness of military and civilian capacities, the prioritization of resources, and the identification of emerging or cascading risks across political, social, technological, and environmental domains.

1. Strategic Objectives and Policy Goals. Strategic vision requires the clear articulation of long-term objectives, such as preserving stability, safeguarding populations, protecting critical infrastructure, and upholding international norms. These objectives must be coherently aligned with the full spectrum of military, diplomatic, economic, and civilian instruments, integrating both preventive and reactive measures, including deterrence and resilience-building strategies.

2. Integration of Civil-Military Capabilities. Effective crisis management demands coordinated deployment of military, police, and civilian actors. Civil protection, humanitarian assistance, and development initiatives must be embedded within military operations to ensure operational coherence and legitimacy, including interoperability across national, regional, and multilateral institutions.

3. Adaptive and Flexible Planning. Strategic vision requires mechanisms for iterative learning and real-time adaptation, allowing strategies to be recalibrated in response to evolving operational contexts, including hybrid or non-linear conflict dynamics. Context-specific knowledge and local engagement are critical to ensuring that interventions are responsive and effective.

4. Decision-Making Architecture. A robust framework necessitates centralized strategic guidance coupled with decentralized operational autonomy to facilitate rapid and informed decision-making. Transparent command structures, clearly defined responsibilities, and accountability mechanisms are essential, as is the integration of intelligence, early-warning systems, and predictive analytics derived from continuous threat environment monitoring.

5. Coordination Across Actors and Levels. Effective crisis management depends on both horizontal coordination across governmental agencies and supranational institutions, and vertical integration with local authorities, civil society, and private-sector actors. Strategic alignment with international partners or coalitions enhances legitimacy, capacity, and operational effectiveness.

6. Resilience and Post-Crisis Recovery. A comprehensive vision embeds long-term resilience within institutions, communities, and systems, cultivating a "bounce-forward" capacity that enables recovery and adaptation. This includes planning for reconstruction, reconciliation, and socio-economic stabilization, accompanied by continuous evaluation to prevent relapse into instability.

7. Normative and Strategic Signaling. Finally, strategic vision incorporates the projection of normative values, deterrence credibility, and international commitments. It emphasizes the interplay between soft power, narrative framing, and operational measures to influence adversary behavior, shape alliances, and reinforce the strategic posture of the managing actor.

In sum, a strategic vision for crisis management and warfare is **not merely a doctrinal exercise**, but a dynamic framework in which **threat environment assessment informs force generation and capability development, adaptive planning, and decision-making**, thereby enabling actors to manage crises effectively while simultaneously strengthening long-term security and resilience.

EDA's role

The 2024 Annual Report marks EDA's 20th anniversary, highlighting its growing role in supporting EU defence cooperation. EDA's mandate has expanded to strengthen capability planning, joint procurement, and defence innovation across Member States. The report emphasizes that Europe's evolving security and threat environment, including hybrid, cyber, and high-intensity conventional threats, directly shapes capability priorities. Around forty collaborative capability projects were active, covering areas such as air and missile defence, electronic warfare, and loitering munitions to respond to these threats. Research

and Technology initiatives included over one hundred projects fostering new defence technologies and innovation aligned with threat-driven needs. EDA coordinated joint procurement efforts, notably for 155mm artillery ammunition, demonstrating pooled demand benefits while enhancing readiness and resilience. Partnerships were deepened with non-EU countries, including Norway, Switzerland, Ukraine, and the United States, to address shared security challenges. The report encourages accelerating joint capability planning to optimize resources, improve interoperability, and respond effectively to the security environment. Innovation and long-term Research and Technology investment are highlighted as critical to maintaining Europe's defence technological edge in a complex threat landscape. Overall, the report calls for integrated planning, collaborative investment, and strengthened EU-wide defence cooperation informed by real-world threats.[5]

At the same time, the European Defence Agency (EDA) reports that EU-wide defence spending reached a record €343 billion in 2024, marking a substantial 19% increase from 2023. This represents 1.9% of the EU's GDP, reflecting heightened security concerns across the continent. Defence expenditure is projected to rise further to €381 billion in 2025, or 2.1% of GDP, with equipment procurement alone expected to exceed €100 billion. The data underscores a rapid acceleration in national procurement, aimed at strengthening capabilities in response to current geopolitical instability.[6]

Key findings from 2024–2025 include:

- **Total Expenditure:** €343 billion in 2024, projected to rise to €381 billion in 2025.
- **Equipment Procurement:** Increased by 39% in 2024 to €88 billion, with forecasts exceeding €100 billion in 2025.
- **R&D Spending:** Reached €13 billion in 2024, a 20% increase, and is expected to reach €17 billion in 2025, highlighting a sustained focus on innovation.
- **Key Spending Nations:** Germany (€90.6 billion) and France (€59.6 billion) account for the largest shares, reflecting their central role in European defence.
- **Investment Benchmarks:** Defence investment reached over 30% of total spending in 2024, signalling a strategic shift toward modernization and capability development.

This surge in spending illustrates the EU's growing commitment to building a technologically advanced and strategically autonomous defense posture. The combination of escalating procurement, increasing R&D investment, and concentrated national contributions has the potential to significantly enhance the European defense industrial base, enabling the Union to respond more effectively to evolving security challenges while fostering innovation and long-term industrial resilience.

The paradox of Europe Defence

Spending €100+ billion on defence doesn't translate directly into soldiers on the ground. A large portion of modern defence budgets goes to advanced equipment such as tanks, aircraft, drones, and warships, as well as R&D and procurement contracts, maintenance, training, logistics, and personnel costs including salaries, pensions, healthcare, and housing. Deployable operational troops—especially for sustained missions abroad—are only a small subset of the total military, since many troops are needed to maintain readiness, rotation cycles, and national territorial defence.

European militaries are mostly designed for high-tech deterrence and collective NATO defence, not large-scale expeditionary humanitarian operations. Germany's Bundeswehr, for example, is structured around high-tech NATO commitments, air defence, and mechanized units, while France, though more expeditionary-capable, still carefully limits troop deployments abroad. This means that sending 5,000 troops for a humanitarian mission is not just a numbers issue—it requires careful strategic, logistical, and political alignment.

EU member states often need parliamentary approval for overseas deployments, and rules of engagement and mandates may limit the size, duration, and role of deployed forces. Domestic politics frequently favors defensive or training missions over large-scale humanitarian operations.

Even for seemingly simple tasks like garbage collection or distributing aid, substantial logistical support is required, including transport, supply chains, secure communications, medical support, and coordination with local authorities. A few thousand soldiers can often cover these tasks because modern humanitarian missions rely heavily on specialized units rather than sheer numbers.

High-end military spending is primarily focused on deterrence against peer adversaries, cyber and intelligence capabilities, technological superiority, and procurement of multi-billion-euro systems. This creates a mismatch: the most expensive equipment increases capability per soldier but does not expand the raw manpower available for mundane or humanitarian tasks.

In short, a country or union can be the third largest defense spender in the world, but if its forces are designed for high-tech deterrence and NATO commitments, only a fraction is available for soft, low-intensity operations. The EU's challenge is not a lack of funding—it is the structure,

[5] https://eda.europa.eu/publications-and-data/all-publications/annual-report-2024

[6] https://eda.europa.eu/publications-and-data/thematic-policy-reports/eda-defence-data-2024-2025

mandate, and logistics of deploying forces effectively.

How to match force structure with budgets

Matching defence budgets with force structure and deployability is a classic challenge in military planning. The goal is to ensure that the money spent actually produces forces that can be mobilized, sustained, and effective in real-world operations. Here's a detailed approach:

Start by clearly defining what the military is meant to do, whether territorial defence, NATO commitments, expeditionary missions, humanitarian operations, cyber defence, or a mix. Each objective has different force and budget implications.

Break down desired missions into the capabilities required, including personnel such as combat troops, specialists, and support staff; equipment like vehicles, aircraft, ships, and communications; and support infrastructure such as logistics, training, and maintenance. Then, calculate how many troops and what type of units are actually needed to perform those missions sustainably.

Allocate funding proportionally to ensure the force structure can be maintained. This includes personnel costs like salaries, pensions, and training, equipment procurement and modernization, and maintenance and operational costs. Avoid situations where most spending goes into advanced systems while there aren't enough troops to operate them or maintain readiness.

Define a deployable force pool separate from territorial or static forces. This ensures there are enough troops and equipment earmarked for missions abroad or emergency operations without undermining national defence.

Ensure budgeting includes sustainment of high-tech equipment and highly trained soldiers. This covers rotation schedules for deployed troops, spare parts and maintenance for equipment, and logistics and transport for rapid deployment. Readiness planning prevents "paper forces" that exist in accounting but cannot be fielded.

Use multi-year planning and predictable procurement. Defence capabilities take years to build, so budgets should be predictable over multiple years to allow the industrial base to produce what the force structure requires, avoiding sudden gaps between spending and deployability.

Include flexibility and surge capacity. A small high-readiness unit can be deployed quickly, while the broader force can be mobilized if needed, maximizing the impact of each euro spent.

Conduct periodic reviews of whether budget allocations are producing the intended deployable capabilities. This allows correction if spending is misaligned with mission readiness.

We are preparing for several kinds of war at once, but structuring our forces as if we only need one—and even that only partially

First, the types of wars being fought today and likely tomorrow.

We are already in **hybrid war**. This is constant, undeclared, and mostly below the threshold of open conflict. It includes cyberattacks, sabotage, disinformation, election interference, energy coercion, migration weaponisation, and pressure on critical infrastructure. Russia is already fighting this war against the EU every day. No tanks needed.

Then there is **high-intensity conventional war**, the kind we see in Ukraine: massed artillery, drones, air defence, electronic warfare, logistics attrition, and industrial-scale ammunition consumption. This is not a short, clean, high-tech conflict. It is brutal, manpower-heavy, and grinding. It punishes weak logistics and shallow stockpiles.

Alongside that is **long-range strike and aerospace war**: missiles, drones, space assets, ISR, air defence, and deep strikes against infrastructure and command nodes. This is where Russia has invested heavily and where Europe is uneven and fragmented.

There is also **maritime and grey-zone conflict**, especially relevant in the Baltic, Black Sea, Arctic, and Mediterranean. This includes sabotage of cables and pipelines, naval intimidation, blockades, and deniable operations.

Finally, there are **stability, deterrence, and resilience missions**: holding territory, protecting borders, sustaining societies under pressure, and supporting allies. These are manpower-intensive and politically sensitive, but they decide wars in the long run.

Now the hard question: are EU armies prepared for a Russian onslaught?

The honest answer is: **partially, unevenly, and dangerously slowly.**

Europe is much better prepared than it was in 2014. Spending is up, awareness is real, and Ukraine has forced a mental shift. But preparedness is not about money alone. It is about **deployable mass, logistics, command, and political will**.

On the positive side, NATO deterrence works. Russia cannot easily attack NATO territory without risking catastrophic escalation. Some countries—Poland, the Baltics, Finland, France—are taking the threat seriously and restructuring forces accordingly.

But structurally, Europe still has deep problems.

Most EU armies lack **mass and endurance**. They can deploy small, high-quality units, but not sustain large-scale combat over months. Ammunition stocks, spare parts, and trained reserves remain thin. Ukraine burns through shells in weeks that Europe produces in months.

Force structures are still optimized for **peacekeeping, crisis management, and symbolic deployments**, not for holding ground under sustained fire. This is why you see the paradox of enormous budgets and tiny deployable contingents.

Command and control remains fragmented. National forces exist, but EU-level military integration is shallow. In a fast-moving crisis, this matters a lot.

And politically, leaders are still caught between **deterrence logic and domestic comfort**. They talk the language of war readiness, but many still budget, recruit, and plan as if large-scale war is unthinkable—or someone else's problem.

So are leaders "thinking with their heads in their arses"?

Some are waking up. Some genuinely understand the stakes. But many are still **thinking in peacetime categories while living in a wartime environment**. They assume technology can replace mass, that deterrence is automatic, and that escalation will always be controlled. History is not kind to those assumptions.

The real danger is not that Europe cannot fight Russia tomorrow. The real danger is that Europe might be forced into a long, grinding confrontation without having aligned its budgets, force structures, industrial base, and political decision-making for endurance.

When military intelligence warn that Russia is preparing an assault on Europe and that the Reassurence force will de facto act as a holding operation and that in absence of resolute countering of Russia during the next 4-5 years, Putin will be tempted to seek security beyond perfection until he is stopped, they have a larger point.

Europe Defense remains largely a Paper Tiger

To get real about the EU's defence capability and to genuinely tune into the threat environment, Europe has to move beyond comforting abstractions and confront the gap between what it spends, what it claims, and what it can actually do in a crisis. Defence in today's environment is not defined by budget lines or summit declarations, but by deployable forces, sustained readiness, industrial depth, and political credibility under pressure. When measured against these criteria, the EU's position is improving, but it remains structurally misaligned with the scale and nature of the threats it faces.

European defence spending has risen sharply, driven by the return of high-intensity war to the continent and by the recognition that the post–Cold War security dividend is over. Procurement budgets have expanded, major platforms are being ordered, and rhetoric has shifted decisively toward deterrence and resilience. Yet this surge in spending has not been matched by a corresponding transformation in force structure. Much of the money is absorbed by long-term procurement, legacy systems, personnel costs, and fragmented national programs that do not immediately increase deployability. As a result, Europe can appear formidable on paper while struggling to field and sustain sizable forces at short notice.

The current threat environment is unforgiving. Russia has demonstrated that it is willing to use force at scale, absorb heavy losses, and sustain a prolonged war of attrition. At the same time, it conducts continuous hybrid operations against European societies, targeting energy infrastructure, undersea cables, information space, and political cohesion. These activities are not peripheral to warfare; they are integral to it. Any realistic European defence posture must therefore assume a constant state of strategic pressure, rather than a clear distinction between peace and war.

High-intensity conventional conflict, as seen in Ukraine, has shattered many assumptions that shaped European defence planning over the past three decades. Precision weapons and advanced platforms matter, but they do not eliminate the need for mass, logistics, and industrial throughput. Artillery ammunition, air defence interceptors, drones, spare parts, and trained personnel are consumed at extraordinary rates. Europe's defence industrial base, long optimized for small production runs and export markets, has struggled to adapt to this reality. Without sustained industrial output, even the most advanced forces quickly lose effectiveness.

Force structure remains a central weakness. Many EU armies are built around small professional cores designed for limited deployments, rotational presence missions, or crisis response operations. These forces are highly capable at the tactical level but lack depth. Reserves are often undertrained or politically sensitive to mobilize, stockpiles are thin, and national logistics chains are not designed for prolonged high-intensity combat. The result is a dangerous mismatch between strategic ambition and operational endurance.

Command, control, and political decision-making further complicate the picture. Defence remains largely national, while threats are regional and systemic. Multinational coordination exists, but it is slow, consensus-driven, and vulnerable to political hesitation. In a fast-moving crisis, delays in authorization, force generation, and rules of engagement could prove decisive. Deterrence depends not only on capability, but on the adversary's belief that those capabilities will actually be used in time.

At the political level, Europe is still adjusting psychologically to a wartime environment. Many leaders acknowledge the threat rhetorically but continue to govern

as if escalation can always be avoided and time will always be available for gradual adaptation. This mindset underestimates both the speed at which crises unfold and the strategic patience of adversaries. Deterrence without readiness is fragile; resilience without endurance is illusory.

Getting real about EU defence capability therefore requires a fundamental reorientation. Budgets must be explicitly tied to deployable force targets, readiness levels, and sustainment capacity. Industrial policy must be treated as a core element of defence, not an afterthought. Reserves and civil-military resilience must be rebuilt, not just discussed. Above all, political leadership must accept that credible defence in today's Europe means planning for prolonged pressure and possible large-scale conflict, not hoping that such scenarios remain hypothetical.

In essence, tuning into the threat environment means accepting that Europe is already in a contested strategic space. The question is no longer whether the EU can afford to adapt its defence posture, but whether it can afford not to. The gap between spending and real capability is narrowing, but unless it is closed decisively, Europe risks entering the next crisis with impressive numbers, strong rhetoric, and insufficient force where it matters most.

С возвращением, Россия!

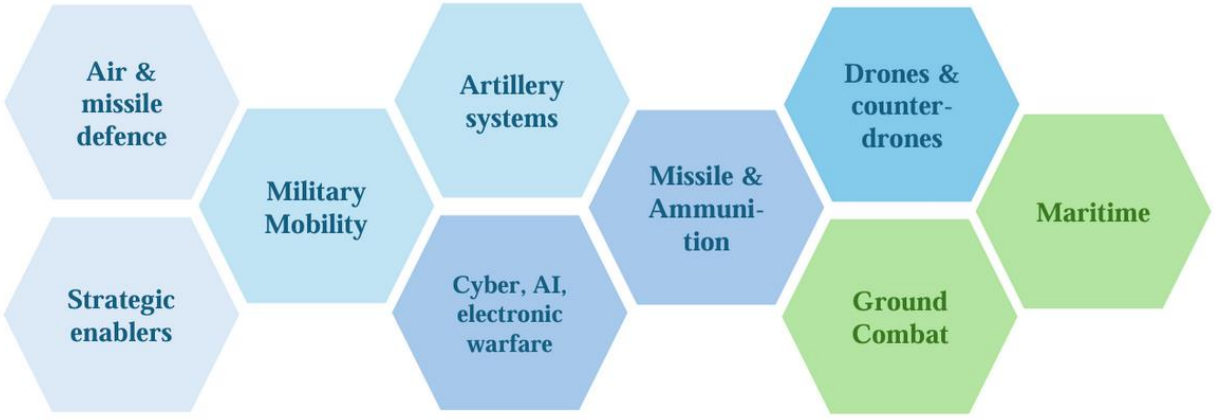
The EU as a framework for modernization of the member states' militaries

Effective governance across the nine priority areas of CSDP —air and missile defense, artillery systems, ammunition and missiles, drones and counter-drone systems, military mobility, artificial intelligence, quantum, cyber and electronic warfare, strategic enablers and critical infrastructure protection, ground combat, and maritime capabilities—requires a coherent division of responsibilities between the European Union and its Member States. While Member States retain primary authority over defense planning and procurement, EU institutions—particularly the European Commission and the European Defence Agency—must ensure strategic coordination, reduce duplication, and align national investments with collectively agreed capability objectives. Governance reform should prioritize the synchronization of national defence planning cycles with EU instruments and ensure coherence with NATO processes. Financial incentives should systematically privilege multinational projects, interoperability, and lifecycle cooperation. Streamlined decision-making and regulatory predictability would enhance efficiency and reinforce the European defense technological and industrial base.

Enhancing EU Added Value

EU added value materializes where collective action generates efficiencies and strategic effects unattainable by individual Member States. Economies of scale in joint procurement—especially in ammunition production, missile systems, and advanced digital technologies—can reduce costs while increasing industrial output. Cross-border industrial integration strengthens innovation ecosystems and enhances strategic autonomy by reducing external dependencies. In capital-intensive domains such as strategic airlift, air-to-air refuelling, maritime domain awareness, and space asset protection, pooling and sharing arrangements produce substantial cost-sharing benefits. Added value also derives from common standards and interoperable systems, which enhance operational effectiveness and ensure that investments contribute to collective defence readiness rather than fragmented national capabilities.

Figure



Source: https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/white-paper-european-defence-readiness-2030_en

"The key for Europe's defence readiness is to close the existing critical capability shortfalls by developing and procuring defence capabilities in all the agreed priority areas. Implementing collaborative projects is important to ensure cost-efficiency, economies of scale, interoperability, and faster delivery times.", the EU Commission underlines.

Strengthening Cross-Border Cooperation

Cross-border cooperation constitutes a structural requirement for overcoming fragmentation in European defence. Joint procurement frameworks and collaborative research initiatives foster interoperability and long-term industrial integration. The development of shared testing facilities, multinational maintenance hubs, and harmonized technical standards consolidates cooperation beyond acquisition phases. Improved military mobility—through coordinated infrastructure investment and simplified legal transit procedures—supports rapid deployment and collective responsiveness. Cross-border innovation clusters in artificial intelligence, cyber defence, and quantum technologies can accelerate technological progress while distributing economic gains across Member States. Sustainable cooperation depends on institutionalized trust, transparency, and mechanisms that reconcile national sovereignty with collective efficiency.

Cross-Tabulation: Governance, EU Added Value, and Cross-Border Cooperation Across the Nine Priority Areas

Dimension / Priority Area	**Air & Missile Defence**	**Artillery Systems**	**Ammunition & Missiles**	**Drones & Counter-Drones**	**Military Mobility**	**AI, Quantum, Cyber & EW**	**Strategic Enablers & Infrastructure Protection**	**Ground Combat**	**Maritime Capabilities**
Governance	Coordinated procurement planning and NATO alignment	Alignment of modernization cycles	EU-supported production coordination	Regulatory harmonization and airspace integration	EU-wide infrastructure standards	Ethical, security and regulatory frameworks	Joint oversight of high-cost shared assets	Standardization of requirements	Coordinated naval capability planning
EU Added Value	Economies of scale in missile shield systems	Reduced unit costs via joint acquisition	Expanded and stabilized production capacity	Shared R&D and scalable innovation	Integrated transport corridors	Technological sovereignty and innovation ecosystems	Cost-sharing of strategic airlift and refuelling	Interoperable land systems	Shared maritime surveillance and situational awareness
Cross-Border Cooperation	Multinational air defence initiatives	Cross-border industrial consortia	Joint stockpiling and framework contracts	Collaborative testing and certification centres	Harmonized customs and transit regimes	Cross-border cyber defence networks	Multinational maintenance and logistics hubs	Integrated training and exercises	Joint naval operations and cooperative shipbuilding

Summary: Next Steps for the fledging CSDP

The future of European defence integration depends less on the articulation of new priorities and more on the effective implementation of existing commitments. The nine priority areas already reflect a comprehensive capability agenda; the principal challenge remains fragmentation, duplication, and insufficient coordination among Member States. Strengthening governance mechanisms, embedding conditionality in EU funding instruments, and aligning national defence planning cycles are essential first steps toward consolidation.

Looking forward, Europe must move from ad hoc

cooperation toward structural integration in selected strategic domains. Joint procurement should become the default rather than the exception, particularly in ammunition production, air and missile defence, and emerging digital technologies. Industrial policy must focus on building resilient cross-border supply chains and fostering genuinely European defence consortia capable of competing globally. At the same time, regulatory harmonization and interoperability standards should be accelerated to ensure operational coherence.

In strategic terms, Europe faces a dual imperative: reinforcing its contribution to NATO while simultaneously enhancing its capacity for autonomous action where necessary. This requires investment in high-end enablers, sustained financial commitments, and political willingness to pool sovereignty in specific capability areas. If these steps are undertaken decisively, European defence cooperation can evolve from coordination toward credible integration, thereby strengthening both collective security and industrial competitiveness.

Proposed Operational Scenarios for Testing the Nine Priority Areas in 2026

To ensure that the nine priority areas translate into credible capability, they should be tested through realistic, multi-domain operational scenarios reflecting the contemporary European security environment. The following illustrative scenarios are designed to stress governance mechanisms, EU added value, and cross-border cooperation simultaneously during 2026 exercises and capability evaluations.

Scenario 1: Integrated Air and Missile Defence Under Saturation Attack

In this scenario, a European Member State on the Union's eastern flank faces a coordinated saturation attack involving ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, loitering munitions, and electronic warfare disruption. The exercise would test air and missile defence integration across multiple Member States, including shared sensor networks, interoperable command-and-control systems, and coordinated interceptor allocation.

Operational objectives would include real-time data sharing, cross-border engagement authorization, and logistics sustainability for interceptor replenishment. The scenario would directly test artillery systems (counter-battery operations), ammunition stockpile coordination, AI-enabled target prioritization, and strategic enablers such as air-to-air refuelling. Governance mechanisms would be assessed by evaluating decision-making speed and the functioning of multinational command structures.

Scenario 2: Large-Scale Ammunition Surge and Industrial Mobilization

This scenario would simulate a prolonged high-intensity conflict requiring rapid ammunition resupply beyond peacetime production levels. Member States would coordinate demand aggregation, activate cross-border industrial production lines, and test joint procurement frameworks.

The focus would not only be operational but also industrial and logistical. The exercise would measure production scalability, cross-border transport efficiency, and stockpile interoperability. Military mobility corridors would be activated to ensure rapid transfer of matériel. Governance effectiveness would be tested by the speed with which funding instruments and joint contracting mechanisms could be mobilized.

Scenario 3: Hybrid Maritime Crisis in the Baltic or Mediterranean

A hybrid scenario could involve sabotage of critical undersea infrastructure, coordinated cyber attacks on port facilities, drone surveillance, and maritime militia-style grey-zone activities. Maritime capabilities, drones and counter-drone systems, cyber defence, and infrastructure protection would be simultaneously engaged.

Operational testing would include multinational naval patrol coordination, maritime domain awareness sharing, rapid deployment of counter-drone technologies, and protection of energy infrastructure. Strategic enablers such as space-based surveillance and secure communications would be evaluated. Cross-border governance would be measured through coordinated rules of engagement and legal interoperability.

Scenario 4: Rapid Military Mobility and Reinforcement Exercise

A crisis requiring rapid reinforcement of a frontline Member State would test military mobility, ground combat interoperability, and logistical coordination. Troop movements across several EU countries would be conducted under compressed timelines, requiring harmonized customs procedures and infrastructure readiness.

The scenario would assess rail and bridge load capacities, cross-border transit permissions, and real-time coordination between civilian authorities and military planners. Ground combat units from multiple Member States would conduct integrated exercises, testing equipment interoperability and command structures.

Scenario 5: Coordinated Cyber and Electronic Warfare Offensive

This scenario would simulate large-scale cyber attacks targeting defence networks, satellite communications, energy grids, and military logistics systems. AI-enabled

detection systems, cross-border cyber defense teams, and electronic warfare units would respond in a coordinated manner.

The test would focus on information sharing speed, cyber incident response integration, and resilience of command-and-control networks. Strategic enablers such as space asset protection and redundant communications would be evaluated. The scenario would also examine legal frameworks governing collective cyber defense responses.

Scenario 6: Expeditionary Crisis Management Operation

A non-Article 5 crisis outside EU territory, such as stabilization in a neighbouring region, would test strategic airlift, air-to-air refuelling, maritime deployment, and integrated ground operations. The scenario would assess the Union's capacity to deploy a multinational force rapidly and sustain it logistically.

This would directly evaluate pooled strategic enablers, interoperability of land systems, joint procurement outcomes, and industrial readiness to support sustained operations, balanced by an evaluation of the prooveness of lead partners willingness to command and provide security.

Table

Scenario	Strategic Benchmarks	Tactical Benchmarks	Operational Benchmarks	Technological Benchmarks
1. Integrated Air and Missile Defence Under Saturation Attack	Effectiveness of multinational command structures; cross-border engagement authorization; decision-making speed under stress	Interceptor allocation, artillery counter-battery operations, AI-enabled target prioritization	Logistics sustainability (interceptor replenishment), real-time data sharing, cross-border C2 interoperability	Sensor fusion networks, integrated radar and missile systems, EW mitigation systems, AI-assisted targeting
2. Large-Scale Ammunition Surge and Industrial Mobilization	Governance efficiency in activating funding, joint procurement, and industrial mobilization	Prioritization of ammunition delivery to frontline units; coordination of military mobility corridors	Stockpile interoperability, cross-border transport efficiency, rapid scaling of production lines	Production automation systems, inventory management, logistics IT platforms
3. Hybrid Maritime Crisis in Baltic/Mediterranean	Legal and governance frameworks for joint rules of engagement; coordination of multinational crisis response	Naval patrol tactics, counter-drone deployment, protection of critical maritime infrastructure	Maritime domain awareness sharing, rapid deployment of countermeasures, coordination between cyber, naval, and drone units	Maritime surveillance sensors, cybersecurity tools, drone detection/neutralization systems, secure communications
4. Rapid Military Mobility and Reinforcement Exercise	Cross-border operational planning and coordination between civilian and military authorities	Tactical integration of ground units; interoperability of weapons systems	Rail/bridge load capacities, transit permissions, real-time operational coordination	Mobility tracking systems, interoperable C2 platforms, logistics management IT, infrastructure readiness monitoring

5. Coordinated Cyber and Electronic Warfare Offensive	Strategic resilience of EU defense networks; legal frameworks for collective cyber defense	Cyber incident response coordination among units; electronic warfare tactics	Information sharing speed; integration of cyber teams across borders; network resilience	AI-enabled cyber threat detection, redundant communications, EW countermeasures, satellite protection technologies
6. Expeditionary Crisis Management Operation	Strategic deployment planning and sustainment of multinational forces	Tactical interoperability of deployed units; joint operations across air, land, and sea	Rapid strategic airlift, logistics sustainment, industrial readiness for ongoing operations	Integrated C2 systems, strategic airlift platforms, air-to-air refueling tech, land system interoperability

Observations:

Scenarios 1, 3, and 5 emphasize **technology-intensive operations** (missile defence, cyber/EW, maritime surveillance).

Scenarios 2, 4, and 6 emphasize **operational and industrial/logistical benchmarks** (ammunition surge, mobility, expeditionary sustainment).

Across all scenarios, strategic benchmarks consistently emphasize governance structures, legal frameworks, and multinational coordination, underscoring that EU exercises are not solely tests of combat capabilities but also rigorous evaluations of decision-making agility, interoperability of command hierarchies, and the ability to synchronize complex political-military responses across borders. This highlights the Union's focus on ensuring that operational effectiveness is matched by robust strategic governance in high-stakes, multi-domain crises.

In summary, testing the nine priority areas through complex, multi-domain scenarios in 2026 would serve several strategic purposes. First, it would expose governance bottlenecks and decision-making delays. Second, it would measure whether EU added value mechanisms—such as joint procurement and industrial scaling—deliver tangible operational benefits. Third, it would reinforce cross-border cooperation through practical interoperability rather than declaratory commitments.

If systematically designed and politically supported, these exercises would transform the nine priority areas from policy objectives into measurable capability benchmarks. The ultimate test for European defense integration in 2026 will not be the number of initiatives launched, but the degree to which Member States can operate, procure, and respond collectively under realistic crisis conditions.

On this basis, Commissioner Kallas could then report back to EU Defense Ministers, having demonstrated the usefulness of current arrangements against operational scenarios and possible gaps and then provide ministers with the opportunity to give input on how to close those gaps in the interest of defense readiness not to mention defense deployability. Did you say saline approach ?

19.Crisis Management

To see the bigger picture of the EU Commission's security policy posture one must accept that right from the outset this involved a three-tiered approach encompassing the EU Enlargement strategy, sub-regional engagement and a concept for crisis management at the executive level.

It would be wrong to attribute the pursuit of the CFSP objectives and values in the context of the fall of the Wall to certain forms alone that embraces multiple objects that we give the same name. You don't sleep in your bed, you want to sleep with the Trinity, God himself. To adopt one method instead of several strands of work is often wrong and will lead to sub-optimal results. The analytical focus in this piece has been the subregionals the meso-level, but the EU's strategy has back from the days of DG1A been three-tiered: Enlargement-Subregionals-Crisis Management. And when you say A, you must also say B, but the EU never grapped the Bull by the Horns and became masters in their own home. Instead, the EU adopted Enlargement-Neighbourhood-Strategic Partnerships, which was later abandoned only to be resurrected again in the context of non-polarity, tentatively.

The European Union's enlargement strategy has historically aimed to promote political stability, economic modernization, democratic governance, and alignment with EU norms, commonly referred to as the Copenhagen criteria. Beyond these internal objectives, enlargement also serves a geopolitical purpose, extending the EU's sphere of influence and stabilizing neighboring regions. The achievements of this strategy are significant. Enlargement has incentivized democratization and reforms in Central

and Eastern Europe, particularly in countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, and the Baltic States. Legal systems were strengthened, anti-corruption measures were implemented, and market liberalization processes were accelerated. Economically, accession to the EU facilitated trade, attracted investment, and enabled access to structural funds, contributing to robust growth in new member states. Geopolitically, enlargement acted as a "peace project," integrating former Eastern Bloc countries into Western institutions and reducing regional security tensions.

Despite these accomplishments, the strategy has faced notable limitations. Enlargement fatigue has emerged as a significant obstacle in recent years, particularly in relation to the Western Balkans, as internal EU resistance has grown over concerns regarding governance, migration, and economic disparities. The conditionality mechanisms of the EU have only partially succeeded in consolidating democratic governance, as evidenced by backsliding on the rule of law in countries such as Hungary and Poland. Moreover, geopolitical backlash from Russia and, increasingly, China has challenged the stabilizing potential of EU enlargement in Eastern Europe.

Subregional engagement represents a complementary EU tool aimed at addressing cross-border issues, fostering regional cooperation, and promoting EU norms beyond formal accession processes. This approach includes initiatives in the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership, the Northern Dimension, and the Black Sea region. The EU has achieved notable successes in this domain. Its facilitation of dialogue in the Western Balkans, including between Serbia and Kosovo, has helped mitigate conflicts. Regional economic and infrastructure programs, such as the Connecting Europe Facility, have strengthened subregional integration. Furthermore, EU standards in areas such as environmental protection, trade facilitation, and governance have diffused across these subregions even in the absence of membership, fostering gradual convergence with EU norms.

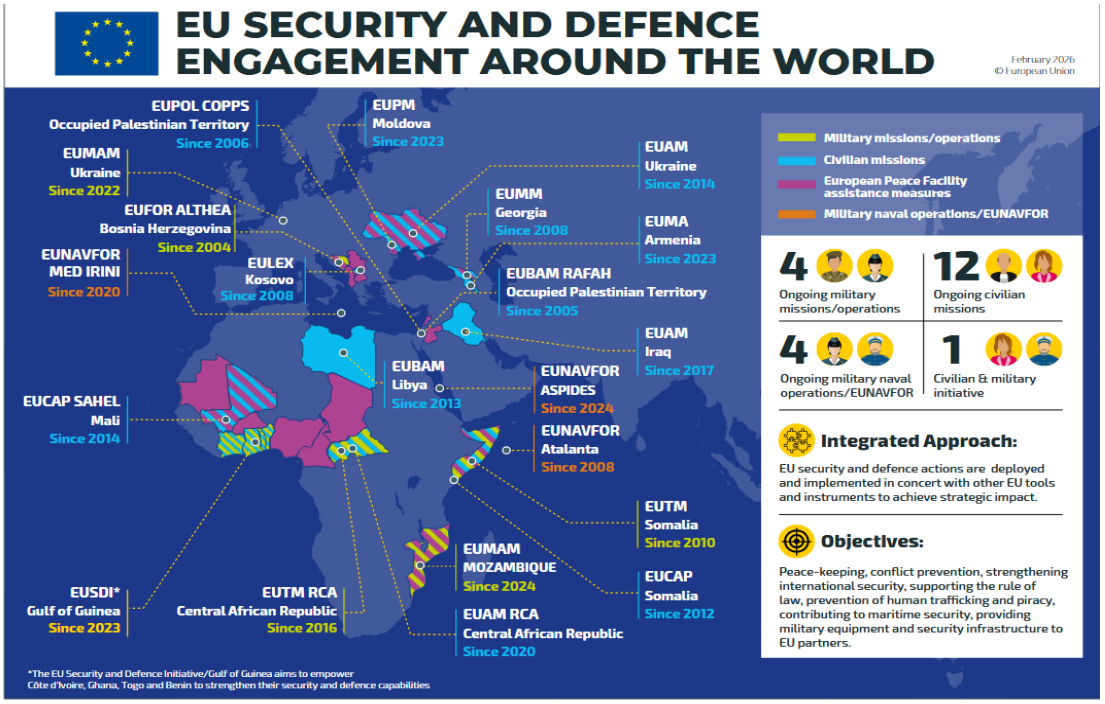
Nonetheless, the EU's influence in subregional engagement remains limited. Without the formal prospect of membership, the Union often struggles to enforce meaningful reforms or resolve entrenched conflicts. Progress can be slow, as seen in the Western Balkans and the unresolved status issues in the South Caucasus, reflecting weak local institutions and persistent political rivalries. The proliferation of overlapping initiatives, including those of the Eastern Partnership and Black Sea programs, has occasionally undermined coherence and diluted the overall impact of subregional policies.

As a crisis manager, the EU deploys diplomatic, economic, and security tools to respond to conflicts, humanitarian emergencies, and geopolitical tensions. Its mediation efforts have proven effective in multiple contexts, including Ukraine, Moldova, and the Cyprus negotiations. The EU's capacity for rapid economic response, through mechanisms such as sanctions regimes, emergency funding, and the Civil Protection Mechanism, has helped mitigate the consequences of crises. Moreover, institutional structures such as the European External Action Service and civilian Common Security and Defence Policy missions provide a formalized framework for coordinated interventions. Nominally, the Crisis management tool-box contains primarily task assignments in relation to humanitarian and rescue tasks, joint disarmament operations, conflict prevention, civilian and military advice and assistance tasks, tasks for combat forces in crisis management and tasks in post-conflict management[7] Again there is no indication of the impact of these CSDP interventions, although an annual report discharges the activities currently under the remit of the EEAS. In practice, there is scant movement as innovation filters down into the military bureaucrscies.

The European Union's crisis management interventions are guided by multiple interrelated interests that combine security, normative, strategic, and multilateral considerations. One of the primary motivations is the protection of the EU and its citizens from threats emanating from instability beyond its borders. Conflicts, terrorism, organised crime, hybrid threats, and irregular migration constitute challenges that can directly affect European security. Consequently, early action in third countries is seen as a preventive measure to safeguard European stability. Crisis management missions and operations aim not only to respond to crises but also to prevent their escalation. In this regard, conflict prevention and peacebuilding are central objectives within the EU's operational framework. The EU also seeks to support partner states in enhancing their own security and governance capacities. Capacity-building activities include training, advice, mentoring, and institutional development. Strengthening partner resilience is considered beneficial both to the host country and to the Union itself.

Figure Cui Bono Charles ?

[7] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/csdp-missions-operations/



Source: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/european-defence-readiness/

Normative interests underpin many interventions, as operations are conducted in accordance with international law and at the request of partner states or through UN mandates. Promoting human rights, the rule of law, and humanitarian principles forms a foundational element of the EU's crisis management portfolio. Geopolitical and strategic considerations also influence intervention decisions, reflecting the EU's aspiration to assert itself as a global security actor. Interventions are thus shaped by the broader geopolitical environment, including the influence of other international powers. Multilateral cooperation is another significant motivation, as the EU often works in concert with the United Nations and other international actors. This approach reinforces the Union's commitment to a rules-based international order. EU missions and operations are tailored to specific regional contexts, adapting objectives to local security and governance needs. In Africa, for instance, interventions often focus on stabilisation, peacebuilding, and state capacity support. In regions affected by hybrid threats or transnational crime, the EU prioritises preventive engagement and law enforcement cooperation. Overall, the crisis management portfolio reflects a synthesis of security imperatives, normative values, strategic positioning, and multilateral engagement. By integrating these dimensions, the EU seeks to maintain stability, uphold international norms, and enhance its credibility as a global actor.

The **EU Commission's 2022 Strategic Crisis Management report** does represent a significant institutional attempt to codify an integrated EU approach to complex crises, emphasizing the synchronization of civilian, military, and diplomatic instruments, early warning mechanisms, and resilience-building across member states. While its framework provides clarity and operational coherence, it risks overestimating the EU's capacity to act decisively in rapidly evolving conflicts, particularly where national interests diverge or external actors exploit institutional fragmentation. Moreover, the report's heavy focus on procedural coordination may underplay the structural and socio-political dimensions of conflict, such as weak state institutions, local grievances, or regional power asymmetries, which historically have undermined EU stabilization missions.

De Coning's Adaptive Peacebuilding paradigm offers a corrective to this technocratic bias by emphasizing context-sensitive, iterative approaches that adjust to on-the-ground realities in post-conflict settings. Its advocacy for local ownership, inclusive governance, and long-term engagement addresses a persistent critique of EU crisis interventions: the tendency toward top-down, externally imposed stabilization strategies that insufficiently account for social dynamics or local legitimacy. However, the adaptive model also presents practical challenges: continuous adaptation requires institutional flexibility and sustained political will that the EU, with its layered bureaucracy and divergent member-state agendas, may struggle to deliver consistently, raising questions about scalability and implementation in high-intensity or politically contested environments.

Alcaro's analysis of the future of EU foreign and security policy situates these operational and theoretical insights within a broader strategic vision, arguing that effective EU crisis management depends on leveraging relational power, normative influence, and multilevel engagement to shape global security dynamics proactively. While compelling in

its recognition of the EU as a strategic actor, the approach risks underplaying structural limitations, including the asymmetry of military capabilities, resource constraints, and the EU's dependence on external partnerships for enforcement in volatile theaters. Critically, Alcaro bridges prevention, stabilization, and post-conflict reconstruction in a policy continuum, yet translating this continuum into coherent practice remains an unresolved challenge: it requires not only coordination across EU institutions but also alignment with local actors, regional organizations, and global powers, a task historically fraught with competing agendas.

Alignment: All three approaches converge on the recognition that effective crisis management requires a continuous continuum from prevention through stabilization to post-conflict reconstruction, highlighting the interconnectedness of early warning, operational intervention, and long-term recovery.

Gaps: The Commission's approach risks institutional rigidity that may limit responsiveness to rapidly changing crises; De Coning emphasizes adaptive, context-sensitive strategies that challenge the EU's bureaucratic structures; and Alcaro underscores the EU's strategic ambitions, which are often constrained by divergent member-state priorities and limited enforcement capacities.

Leverage Points: The EU could enhance effectiveness by embedding adaptive learning mechanisms into its operations, prioritizing local ownership and legitimacy, and aligning strategic influence with the practical realities of mission execution.

Critical Insight: Maximum impact is achieved when procedural coordination (Commission), iterative and adaptive engagement (De Coning), and strategic foresight (Alcaro) are integrated into a coherent policy framework; however, success ultimately hinges on reconciling institutional standardization with operational flexibility, ensuring that EU interventions are both strategically ambitious and practically implementable.

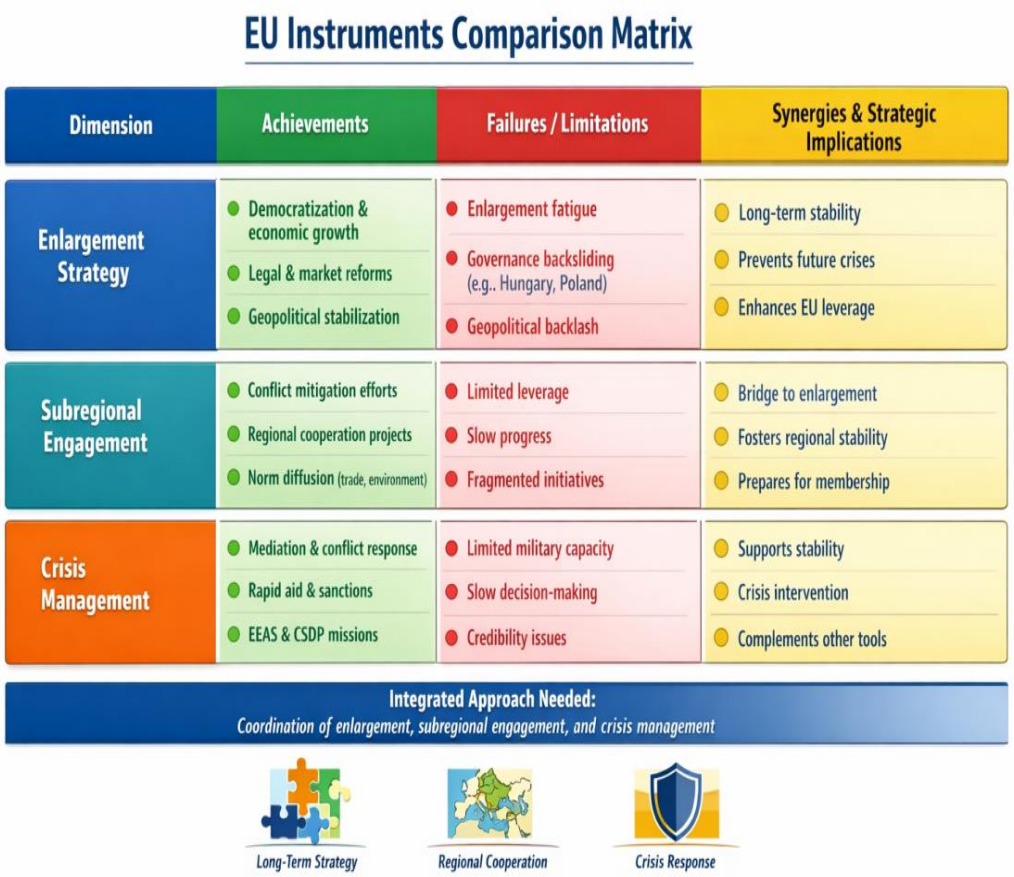
Taken together, these three bodies of work outline a **progressive EU crisis management paradigm**: the Commission report provides the operational scaffolding, De Coning injects flexibility and context sensitivity, and Alcaro frames strategic purpose and global positioning. Nevertheless, a critical perspective reveals persistent tensions between ambition and capacity, between normative objectives and realpolitik constraints, and between institutional standardization and the adaptive demands of complex crises. For future policy, the EU must reconcile these tensions by developing mechanisms for rapid decision-making, integrating local legitimacy into operational planning, and sustaining political commitment across member states to ensure that prevention, stabilization, and post-conflict reconstruction are not only sequential ideals but actionable and mutually reinforcing practices.

The relationship between **crisis management, adaptation, and decision-making** is one of **dynamic interdependence under conditions of uncertainty**. In other words, effective crisis management depends on the ability of decision-makers to **adapt continuously** to evolving circumstances, feedback from the operational environment, and shifting political or social realities. Adaptation informs decision-making by providing new information, highlighting unintended consequences, and suggesting alternative courses of action, while decisions shape the scope and direction of adaptive responses, creating a **feedback loop** where learning, adjustment, and strategy reinforce each other in real time.

Put more critically, this relationship is **not linear or sequential**: rigid decision-making structures can hinder adaptation, whereas overly flexible adaptive approaches without clear decision authority can produce fragmentation or delay, especially in complex, multi-actor crises such as EU interventions in post-conflict regions.

Indeed, the EU's crisis management capabilities are constrained by several factors. Military capacity remains limited, with many missions dependent on NATO support or the voluntary deployment of member states' forces. Decision-making is often slow due to the requirement for consensus, which hampers rapid responses in urgent crises, such as in Syria and Libya. Additionally, the Union's external credibility can be questioned by other actors, who may perceive its interventions as politically motivated rather than neutral, thereby limiting the effectiveness of its crisis management efforts. The EU is not a civilian power. It must become a defense actor. And this requires problem-solving abilities, adaptation and a decision-making system that is both efficient and effective combining performance with accountability and operational acumen with strategic leadership with a coherent and integrated defense policy framework.

Figure the Trinity of Peace & Prosperity



Explanandum for the EU Instruments Comparison Matrix

The infographic titled **"EU Instruments Comparison Matrix"** visually represents the European Union's principal tools for exerting influence in its neighborhood and globally: **Enlargement Strategy, Subregional Engagement, and Crisis Management**. Each column—Achievements, Failures/Limitations, and Synergies & Strategic Implications—highlights how these instruments operate individually and collectively to define the EU's foreign policy capacity.

Enlargement Strategy is depicted as the EU's long-term structural lever. Its achievements, including democratization, economic growth, and geopolitical stabilization, illustrate the Union's capacity to shape external governance and institutional frameworks. The failures—enlargement fatigue, governance backsliding, and geopolitical backlash—signal the limits of the EU's influence when internal cohesion weakens or when external powers resist integration efforts. The synergies section emphasizes that successful enlargement underpins stability, prevents future crises, and enhances the EU's leverage, reflecting its identity as a normative power capable of shaping external actors through institutional incentives.

Subregional Engagement is visualized as a flexible, cooperative tool that fosters regional stability and norm diffusion. Achievements such as conflict mitigation, regional cooperation projects, and spreading of EU standards demonstrate the EU's preventive capacity in areas outside formal membership. Its limitations—restricted enforcement power, slow progress, and fragmented initiatives—highlight that influence without binding mechanisms is conditional. The synergies reinforce that subregional engagement bridges the gap toward enlargement, fosters regional stability, and prepares countries for eventual membership, positioning the EU as a proactive stabilizer and mediator.

Crisis Management is shown as the reactive dimension of EU foreign policy. Achievements, including mediation, rapid economic or humanitarian interventions, and institutionalized missions, demonstrate the EU's operational ability to respond to immediate threats. Limitations, such as constrained military capacity, slow decision-making, and credibility issues, underline that the EU's crisis response relies heavily on multilateral coordination and member state cooperation. Synergies indicate that crisis management supports stability, complements other tools, and ensures that the EU can act even when preventive or structural measures are insufficient.

The lower section of the infographic, labeled **"Integrated Approach Needed"**, encapsulates the central thesis: the EU's global effectiveness arises from the coordinated application of its structural, preventive, and reactive instruments. The three illustrative icons—puzzle pieces for long-term strategy, regional maps for cooperation, and a shield for crisis response—symbolize how enlargement, subregional engagement, and crisis management intersect to project the EU's influence externally. The infographic emphasizes that the EU's foreign policy power is most robust when these tools are mutually reinforcing, demonstrating the Union's distinctive approach as a normative, strategic, and multi-layered global actor.

When comparing these three instruments, distinct differences emerge. The enlargement strategy is a long-term, structural tool that drives transformative change, whereas subregional engagement is more flexible but less binding, serving as a complementary instrument that facilitates stability and norm diffusion. Enlargement's success creates favorable conditions for subregional engagement, yet subregional programs alone cannot substitute for the incentive of membership. Crisis management, in contrast, is primarily reactive, addressing immediate conflicts and humanitarian challenges. While enlargement can prevent future crises through integration and structural reform, crisis management is constrained by institutional and operational limitations. Subregional engagement and crisis management both contribute to regional stabilization, but the former is cooperative and preventive, whereas the latter is responsive and occasionally coercive.

The combined effects of these EU instruments demonstrate significant synergies. Enlargement, subregional engagement, and crisis management reinforce each other: successful enlargement reduces the need for crisis intervention, subregional programs prepare aspirant countries for eventual membership, and credible crisis management preserves the stability necessary for both enlargement and regional cooperation. Conversely, weaknesses in one pillar can strain the others. Limited enlargement prospects in regions such as the Western Balkans diminish the leverage of subregional programs and complicate crisis management efforts. The strategic lesson is that the EU's approach is most effective when long-term structural strategies, regional cooperation initiatives, and immediate crisis interventions are coordinated, coherent, and adequately resourced.

In conclusion, the EU's instruments of enlargement, subregional engagement, and crisis management have produced measurable benefits in democratization, economic integration, and regional stability. Nevertheless, their effectiveness is constrained by political consensus, military capacity, and internal coherence. The optimal approach requires a carefully coordinated strategy that links long-term integration with flexible regional programs and credible crisis response, ensuring that each tool reinforces the others and maximizes the EU's influence and stability in its neighboring regions.

Strategic crisis management in the EU is shifting toward a proactive, "Preparedness Union" approach, focusing on enhancing resilience, anticipation, and comprehensive, all-hazard management across all policy sectors. Initiated to address interconnected, systemic, and cascading risks—such as health pandemics, climate change, and cyber threats—the strategy emphasizes solidarity, cross-border coordination, and the integration of civil-military, public-private, and citizen-level preparedness to ensure long-term resilience.

Current Challenges and Improvements

Fragmented Toolboxes: Existing EU crisis management mechanisms remain compartmentalized, often operating in silos, which underscores the need for stronger horizontal coordination across sectors and institutions. **Integrated Risk Assessment:** Enhancing the EU's ability to anticipate and manage risks with cascading, cross-border effects remains a priority, requiring more sophisticated data sharing, modeling, and scenario planning. **Strengthening Capabilities:** Efforts are underway to bolster civil protection, deepen civil-military coordination, and implement a comprehensive "Union plan" for health and other systemic crises by 2025, reflecting a recognition that resilience demands both institutional capacity and operational readiness.

The EU is increasingly moving beyond a reactive, crisis-by-crisis mindset toward establishing a permanent, proactive preparedness culture. This strategy seeks to embed security considerations across all EU policy areas, promoting a "bounce forward" capability that not only ensures recovery from crises but enhances systemic resilience, enabling institutions and societies to emerge stronger and better equipped for future challenges.

In essence, the infographic serves as both a **diagnostic tool** and a **strategic framework**: it allows observers to assess the EU's capabilities, limitations, and synergies in real time while highlighting how each instrument contributes to its overarching foreign policy objectives. The visual presentation underscores that the EU's role in global affairs is neither purely reactive nor coercive, but a combination of long-term structural influence, preventive regional engagement, and calibrated crisis intervention.

Strengthening the European Union's Concept of Crisis Management

The European Union (EU) has developed a dense and diversified set of crisis-management instruments encompassing diplomacy, civilian and military missions, economic measures, humanitarian assistance, and regulatory power. Despite this extensive toolbox, the Union's crisis responses have frequently been characterized by delayed action, fragmented implementation, and limited strategic impact. This suggests

that the principal challenge facing EU crisis management is not one of capability scarcity, but of institutional alignment, decision-making authority, and strategic coherence.

1. From Reactive Response to Anticipatory Governance

EU crisis management remains predominantly reactive. While early-warning and situational awareness mechanisms—such as those housed within the European External Action Service (EEAS), the EU Intelligence and Situation Centre (INTCEN), and the EU Satellite Centre (SatCen)—are comparatively well developed, they lack institutionalized pathways into political decision-making. Risk identification does not systematically translate into preventive or pre-emptive action.

Strengthening EU crisis management therefore requires a shift towards anticipatory governance. This would entail the formalization of escalation thresholds linking early-warning indicators to predefined political procedures, including mandatory deliberation within the Political and Security Committee (PSC). Such mechanisms would reduce the discretionary gap between foresight and response and embed prevention more firmly within the EU's crisis-management architecture.

2. Leadership and Authority in Hybrid Crises

Contemporary crises increasingly exhibit hybrid characteristics, combining military, economic, informational, and internal security dimensions. Within the EU system, such crises frequently fall between institutional mandates, resulting in coordination challenges and diluted leadership. The absence of clearly designated crisis leads contributes to procedural inertia and accountability deficits.

A strengthened crisis-management concept would require the ex ante designation of institutional leadership according to crisis typology, distinguishing, for example, between primarily geopolitical-military crises, geo-economic disruptions, and hybrid internal–external emergencies. Clarifying leadership responsibilities would enhance coherence, reduce inter-institutional competition, and improve operational tempo without necessitating treaty reform.

3. Operational Integration of Policy Instruments

Although the EU formally endorses a "comprehensive" or "integrated" approach to crises, operational integration across policy domains remains limited. Civilian and military missions under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), sanctions regimes, development cooperation, trade policy, and financial instruments frequently operate on divergent timelines and according to distinct logics of intervention.

To address this fragmentation, crisis management should be organized around theatre-specific integrated task structures bringing together relevant services of the EEAS and the European Commission, complemented by financial institutions such as the European Investment Bank where appropriate. Such structures would align political objectives, sequencing of instruments, and monitoring frameworks, thereby enhancing strategic effectiveness.

4. Decision-Making Constraints and Flexible Coalitions

The unanimity requirement in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) continues to constitute a structural constraint on timely and robust crisis responses. While treaty change remains politically unlikely, existing flexibility mechanisms—most notably constructive abstention—are underutilized due to political norms favoring consensus.

Strengthening EU crisis management would require a normalization of coalition-based action under an EU framework, allowing willing member states to proceed without being obstructed by dissenting partners. Presenting alternative decision pathways—consensus-based and coalition-based—could reduce veto incentives and preserve EU institutional legitimacy while enabling differentiated action.

5. Crisis Endurance and Temporal Governance

EU crisis-management practice has tended to prioritize short-term stabilization over long-term engagement. As crises become protracted, political attention, financial commitment, and strategic coherence often erode. This temporal mismatch undermines the sustainability of EU interventions and weakens their political impact.

A strengthened approach would conceptualize crises as multi-year governance challenges rather than discrete events. Multi-annual crisis frameworks with periodic strategic reviews should replace ad hoc extensions of mandates and funding, thereby fostering continuity, learning, and adaptive strategy adjustment.

6. Conceptual Clarity: Crisis Management as Norm-Guided Power

A persistent limitation of EU crisis management lies in its reluctance to articulate its actions in terms of power. This avoidance obscures the inherently political nature of crisis intervention and contributes to inconsistencies between declared objectives and operational choices.

Reframing crisis management as norm-guided power projection would enhance conceptual clarity. Explicit recognition of trade-offs—between stability and transformation, values and access, deterrence and mediation—would allow for more credible strategy formulation and evaluation. Incorporating formal

assessments of political costs and opportunity trade-offs into crisis strategies would further strengthen strategic discipline.

7.Scaling-up of Frontex

It is unfanthomable that Frontex has scaling-up problems from the present size of 8,000 members of the standing corpse to 30,000 as announced in President von der Leyen in her political program for her second term. There are over 125,000 Customs and border police agents in the EIBM-system. It is imperative the barriers are understood and acted on, and that para-military training modules are integrated into the various Frontex academies and that a post as Frontex Camp Commander hailing from a Latin country is created. He must be represented on the Executive board of Frontex. On this basis the relationship with the Drone Directorate of DG Defense must be clarified and a set of rules of engagement be deliberated in a sub-committee of Parliament's Frontex scrutiny committee, as milestones are set for the standing corpse to become fully operational. In time, Frontex could become part of the resort of DG Defence.

8. Strategic Communication and Narrative Coherence

Finally, EU crisis management is weakened by fragmented strategic communication. Divergent institutional narratives dilute the Union's external messaging and create opportunities for adversarial actors to shape perceptions. Effective crisis management requires narrative coherence alongside operational coherence.

Establishing a unified strategic narrative per crisis, anchored to designated leadership and consistently communicated across institutions, would enhance the EU's credibility and visibility as a crisis manager.

Summary

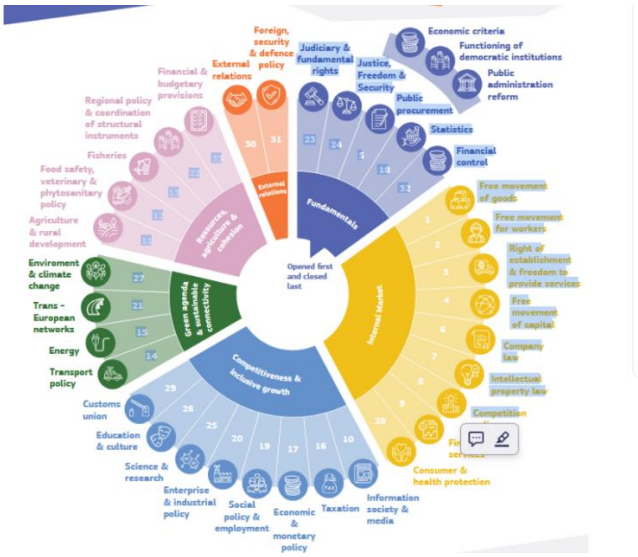
The effectiveness of EU crisis management is constrained less by material or institutional deficits than by unresolved tensions between anticipation and reaction, coordination and authority, and normative ambition and political realism. Strengthening the EU's crisis-management concept therefore requires not merely procedural refinement, but a deeper acceptance of hierarchy, temporality, and power as intrinsic elements of crisis governance. Only by addressing these foundational issues can the EU enhance its capacity to act decisively and coherently in an increasingly contested international environment. This also gives the EEAS leverage as preparations are made for the demerger of DG CSDP into DG Defense proper

20.The EUs Enlargement Strategy

The European Union's enlargement strategy is the Union's structured framework for admitting new member states while safeguarding institutional cohesion, legal uniformity, and political stability. It is both a geopolitical instrument and a rules-based transformation process, designed to export stability, democracy, and economic integration across the continent.

At its core lie the accession criteria defined by the European Council in Copenhagen in 1993, commonly known as the Copenhagen criteria. These require candidate countries to demonstrate stable democratic institutions, rule of law, human rights protection, respect for minorities, a functioning market economy, and the capacity to adopt and implement the EU's acquis communautaire—the full body of EU law and obligations.

Figure The EU Enlargement Negotiation Framework



The enlargement process is structured around 35 negotiating chapters grouped into thematic clusters. As reflected in the Commission's revised methodology (2020), chapters are organized into clusters such as "Fundamentals" (judiciary, public administration reform, financial control), "Internal Market" (free movement of goods, services, capital, competition policy), "Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth," "Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity," "Resources and Agriculture," and "External Relations." The "Fundamentals" cluster is opened first and closed last, emphasizing rule of law and democratic governance as the backbone of accession.

The European Commission manages negotiations, monitors reforms through annual country reports, and proposes opening or closing chapters. The Council of the European Union decides unanimously on key steps, while the European Parliament must give its consent before accession treaties enter into force. Ultimately, accession requires ratification by all existing member states and the acceding country.

Strategically, enlargement serves multiple purposes: consolidating democracy in post-authoritarian or post-conflict regions; integrating economies into the EU single market; extending regulatory and environmental standards; and strengthening Europe's geopolitical influence. In recent years, enlargement has regained strategic urgency in light of security concerns in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, positioning accession policy as a central pillar of the Union's foreign and security architecture.

Thus, EU enlargement is not merely expansion; it is a long-term transformative partnership based on conditionality, gradual integration, and institutional adaptation—balancing the Union's deepening with its widening.

The **Pre-Accession Readiness Review and Enlargement Forum** can be conceptualized as a dual-track governance instrument within the European Union enlargement framework, combining rigorous technical assessment with structured political dialogue. The Pre-Accession Readiness Review would operate as a systematic, evidence-based evaluation of a candidate or potential candidate country's preparedness for membership. Moving beyond conventional annual progress reports, it introduces measurable benchmarks, scenario testing, and institutional stress-testing that align with the acquis communautaire and the strategic priorities of the Union.

The Review would assess institutional capacity to implement EU legislation, economic convergence and resilience, adherence to the rule of law and judicial independence, alignment with EU security and foreign policy objectives, and administrative capacity to absorb Union funds. Its methodology would be structured around evaluation clusters reflecting negotiation chapters such as rule of law, internal market integration, green transition, and digitalization. Operational stress tests would simulate scenarios including the absorption of structural funds, crisis management responses, border management under Schengen obligations, and energy security shocks. Quantitative scorecards could measure governance quality, fiscal sustainability, market integration, and foreign policy alignment, while a geopolitical alignment index would indicate the degree to which candidate countries converge with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy positions. Integration readiness could be analyzed through scenarios ranging from full accession to staged or sectoral membership.

Complementing the technical review, the Enlargement Forum would provide a high-level political and strategic platform. Convened on an annual or biannual basis under the joint coordination of the European Commission and the European External Action Service with the support of the rotating Council Presidency, the Forum would bring together Member States, candidate countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Serbia, representatives of European financial institutions, parliamentary bodies, and civil society actors. The Forum would steer political deliberation on enlargement timelines, monitor the credibility of domestic reforms, coordinate pre-accession investment strategies, and integrate enlargement objectives into broader EU industrial and digital policy frameworks.

Strategically, establishing a dual instrument of a technical review and political forum addresses both the procedural and geopolitical dimensions of enlargement. It could mitigate accession fatigue by providing predictability, enhance transparency and comparability across candidate states, and reinforce the legitimacy of enlargement decisions among Member States. Such a framework would also allow for more deliberate integration of enlargement with the EU's ambitions in industrial development, digital sovereignty, and strategic partnerships. Outputs from the Forum might include a readiness dashboard, a convergence map of candidate performance, a pre-accession investment tracker, and an annual strategic outlook on enlargement priorities. Overall, this approach positions enlargement as a structured, forward-looking policy domain, rather than a purely technocratic process, aligning it with the Union's long-term geopolitical and institutional objectives

The **European Democracy Shield** is a strategic initiative launched by the European Commission in November 2025 under the portfolio of the Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law, and Consumer Protection, Michael McGrath[8]. The initiative represents a comprehensive, coordinated effort to strengthen democratic resilience across the European Union in the face of both internal and external pressures. It builds on previous frameworks such as the European Democracy Action Plan, the Digital Services

[8] https://epd.eu/what-we-do/policy/european-democracy-shield/

Act, the AI Act, and the European Media Freedom Act, transitioning from primarily legislative measures to a more holistic focus on implementation, institutional coordination, and societal engagement.

The Democracy Shield is designed to address the growing threats posed by foreign information manipulation, election interference, declining media freedom, the influence of Very Large Online Platforms, and domestic democratic regressions within the EU. By reinforcing the integrity of information, protecting the fairness of electoral processes, strengthening independent media and civil society, and fostering citizen engagement, the initiative aims to enhance democratic robustness while simultaneously contributing to European security. Central to this approach is the creation of mechanisms such as the European Centre for Democratic Resilience, which will serve as a hub for EU institutions, Member States, and potentially candidate countries, to anticipate, detect, and respond to evolving hybrid threats.

Strategically, the Democracy Shield integrates into the EU's broader geopolitical and governance objectives. It establishes a coordinated policy framework across key Directorates-General, including DG JUST and DG CNECT, and engages the European Parliament through the Special Committee on the European Democracy Shield. The initiative also recognizes that strengthening democracy inherently reinforces the EU's resilience against authoritarian influence, hybrid threats, and disinformation campaigns. Its implementation prioritizes the enforcement of existing legislation, support to the media sector, the cultivation of enabling environments for civil society, and the incorporation of democratic safeguards into the EU's security and defence strategy.

In practical terms, the Democracy Shield envisions continuous monitoring, reporting, and strategic coordination. By linking legislative enforcement with civic and institutional empowerment, it seeks to provide a robust framework capable of responding to both immediate threats and long-term democratic challenges. The initiative positions the European Union as both a defender of internal democratic standards and an exemplar for democracy promotion externally, with potential relevance for candidate countries and enlargement policy, reinforcing the Union's credibility and cohesion in a complex geopolitical environment.

The Guardrails of EU Enlargement

Figure Setting in Guardrails

A strengthened EU enlargement strategy for the Western Balkans must be grounded in the six governance guardrails that structure the current conceptual model. Each guardrail represents not only a thematic reform area but also a strategic stabilizer that collectively determines the credibility, sustainability, and geopolitical resilience of the

accession process. Expanding the model requires treating these guardrails as interconnected governance systems rather than isolated reform chapters.

The first guardrail, centred on organised crime and rule-of-law enforcement, must evolve into a comprehensive regional security architecture. This involves not only capacity-building for police and judicial institutions but also the creation of interoperable intelligence networks, shared investigative standards, and depoliticised oversight mechanisms. By embedding these reforms within a regional rule-of-law ecosystem, the EU can transform fragmented enforcement into a coherent security shield that reinforces institutional trust.

Minority rights protection, the second guardrail, should be reframed as a structural component of democratic resilience rather than a social-policy add-on. Legal codification, independent oversight bodies, and inclusive governance practices must be complemented by long-term societal integration strategies, including education reforms, intercultural dialogue platforms, and cross-border minority-rights monitoring. This approach positions minority protection as a stabilising force that strengthens cohesion and aligns domestic governance with EU normative expectations.

Anti-corruption and governance integrity form the third guardrail and require a shift from reactive enforcement to systemic prevention. Independent anti-corruption agencies and judicial reforms must be embedded within transparent public-administration systems, digitalised service delivery, and open-data infrastructures. Civil society participation becomes essential, not as an external critic but as a co-producer of accountability. Regional cooperation mechanisms can further harmonise standards and reduce opportunities for state capture.

The fourth guardrail, external relations and regional stability, must be expanded into a structured diplomatic framework that integrates conflict mediation, bilateral dispute resolution, and alignment with EU foreign-policy norms. This includes institutionalising early-warning mechanisms, establishing joint diplomatic training programs, and embedding EU guidance into national security strategies. Such measures strengthen institutional integrity and create a predictable environment for reforms.

Sub-regional cooperation, the fifth guardrail, should be conceptualised as a multi-level governance accelerator. Harmonised cross-border standards, shared monitoring systems, and permanent dialogue platforms can transform fragmented reform efforts into coordinated regional initiatives. Infrastructure integration, digital interoperability, and joint technical-assistance programs enhance the region's collective readiness for EU governance structures and reduce administrative asymmetries.

The final guardrail, democracy shield and governance resilience, requires a long-term approach to safeguarding democratic institutions. Electoral integrity, media independence, judicial checks and balances, and empowered civil society actors form the core of this resilience. However, these must be supported by early-warning systems for democratic backsliding, structured civic-participation channels, and institutionalised public-oversight mechanisms. This ensures that democratic norms are not only adopted but internalised.

In summary, the expanded model positions EU enlargement as a governance-anchored transformation process. Each guardrail reinforces the others, creating a strategic architecture that enhances rule-of-law credibility, societal cohesion, regional stability, and democratic resilience. By deepening these guardrails and integrating them into a coherent enlargement framework, the EU can strengthen both the legitimacy and the effectiveness of its engagement in the Western Balkans.

The Influence of European Subregional Dynamics on EU Enlargement Strategy

The European Union's enlargement strategy is profoundly shaped by the distinct political, economic, and geopolitical characteristics of Europe's subregions. Conceptually, Europe may be delineated into several subregions: **Western Europe**, encompassing the core, long-established EU member states; **Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)**, which includes both recent entrants and candidate countries; the **Western Balkans**, the principal focus of contemporary enlargement initiatives; and the **Eastern Partnership states**, such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, which occupy a more peripheral role in accession planning. Each subregion presents unique challenges and opportunities that inform the EU's strategic approach to enlargement.

Enlargement is predicated on adherence to democratic norms, the rule of law, and robust governance structures. In regions such as the Western Balkans, historical political instability, ethno-national tensions, and institutional fragility necessitate a **conditional, incremental accession framework**. By contrast, more politically consolidated regions, notably within the CEE, have demonstrated comparatively higher administrative capacity and compliance with EU acquis, enabling more expedited integration processes.

Economic capacity constitutes a central determinant of enlargement strategy. Subregions with higher levels of economic development and institutional competence are generally able to assimilate EU regulatory and structural frameworks more rapidly. Conversely, less developed subregions require **extended transitional arrangements** and substantial **structural funding support**, which prolongs accession timelines and complicates policy harmonization.

The EU's enlargement calculus is not solely economic or political but is also informed by geopolitical imperatives. Countries in proximate subregions, particularly the Western Balkans, are often considered strategic buffers against external influence, notably from Russia. Consequently, EU engagement in these areas involves both incentivization for reform and deliberate sequencing of accession, balancing integration with broader security objectives.

Subregional dynamics, including historical disputes and ongoing border issues, influence the EU's approach to candidate states. The Union frequently conditions accession upon **regional cooperation mechanisms**—for example, through frameworks such as CEFTA—to mitigate conflict potential and foster inter-state collaboration. Subregional frictions, therefore, function as both a constraint and a focal point for enlargement strategy, emphasizing the necessity of diplomacy and conflict resolution prior to membership.

Enlargement strategy is further modulated by the diverse interests of incumbent member states. Western European states may prioritize stabilization and democratic consolidation in the Balkans, whereas CEE states, drawing upon their own accession experiences, may advocate for accelerated integration of proximate neighbors. Such intra-EU heterogeneity necessitates a calibrated, subregion-sensitive approach, balancing political, economic, and security objectives.

In sum, the EU's enlargement strategy is profoundly contingent upon the unique characteristics of its subregions. Political stability, economic development, regional cooperation, and geopolitical considerations collectively shape a **tailored, conditional approach** to accession. Enlargement is therefore neither uniform nor linear; rather, it reflects a strategic, context-specific engagement that seeks to harmonize the imperatives of institutional capacity, regional stability, and broader European security interests.

Strengthening the EU Enlargement Strategy: An Academic, Governance-Aligned Narrative

A more resilient and credible EU enlargement strategy requires moving beyond procedural conditionality toward a deeper model of shared governance transformation. Building on the six guardrails outlined in the Western Balkans framework, the EU can reinforce its strategic posture by embedding enlargement within a co-governance architecture that links institutional reform, regional stability, and societal resilience.

A first step involves shifting from a compliance-driven approach to a co-investment model. Enlargement has long been framed as a sequence of obligations; however, durable reform emerges when the EU and candidate states jointly design, finance, and monitor transformation processes. Reform Investment Compacts, jointly administered task forces, and transparent public dashboards would create shared ownership and reduce the political volatility that often undermines rule-of-law reforms.

A second dimension concerns the introduction of phased membership. Rather than maintaining a binary "in or out" structure, the EU can operationalize a gradual integration pathway that grants access to selected EU mechanisms as governance benchmarks are met. Early participation in the Single Market, EU agencies, and cohesion-fund instruments would generate tangible benefits for citizens and reduce reform fatigue, while also strengthening the credibility of the EU's commitments.

Rule-of-law enforcement remains the central guardrail. To address persistent vulnerabilities—ranging from organized crime to state capture—the EU can institutionalize independent review mechanisms, automatic corrective measures, and enhanced transparency requirements. Regional anti-corruption platforms, integrated with Europol and OLAF, would reinforce judicial independence and reduce political interference, thereby strengthening institutional accountability.

Given the intensifying geopolitical competition in the region, the enlargement strategy must also incorporate a security and resilience dimension. A Western Balkans Security Framework—encompassing cyber-defense cooperation, counter-disinformation mechanisms, energy-security integration, and coordinated foreign-policy alignment—would reduce external vulnerabilities and anchor the region more firmly within the EU's strategic ecosystem.

Regional cooperation remains a foundational pillar. Deepening existing initiatives through harmonized standards, cross-border infrastructure corridors, shared monitoring systems, and integrated digital-identity frameworks would enhance economic interdependence and governance coherence. A more interconnected region enters the EU not as a collection of fragmented states but as a functional governance space aligned with EU norms.

Finally, societal participation must be institutionalized. Civil society organizations, academic institutions, and youth networks should be embedded as formal actors in the accession process. Their involvement in monitoring, public oversight, and policy dialogue strengthens democratic resilience and ensures that reforms are not merely administrative but societal in scope.

In the Western Balkan summit declaration, our imprimatur is clearly visible on notably Kosovo. In the summit declaration it says:

In the context of the radical change of the global geopolitical situation, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the conflict in the Middle East, and at the start of the new EU leadership cycle the strategic partnership between the European Union and the Western Balkans is more

important than ever.We share a common future and face urgent challenges that we can only overcome together. We owe it to our citizens to build a future of peace and prosperity, based on shared principles and values, and common interests. The future of the Western Balkans is in our Union. We once again reconfirm our full and unequivocal commitment to the European Union membership perspective of the Western Balkans. Enlargement is a geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity, as stated in the Granada Declaration. There is a new dynamism in the enlargement process and notable progress since our last Summit. The acceleration of the accession process, based on credible reforms by partners, fair and rigorous conditionality and the principle of own merits, is in our mutual interest.

The EU welcomes the resolve of the Western Balkans partners to respect and commit to core European values and principles, in line with international law and the restated commitment to the primacy of democracy, fundamental rights and values and the rule of law. The rule of law, freedom of expression, independent and pluralistic media, gender equality, and a strong role for civil society are crucial to ensure a functioning democracy. In this respect, actions will speak louder than words as partners take ownership and implement the necessary reforms, notably in the area of fundamentals. The EU calls on partners to guarantee the rights and equal treatment of persons belonging to minorities. We will continue to support our partners' efforts to fight organised crime and corruption. The geopolitical context in Europe demands unity and solidarity from us all, in firm support of Ukraine and in defence of the international rules-based order. Standing together with the

EU remains a clear sign of our Western Balkan partners' strategic orientation. The EU will continue to invest in multilateralism and cooperate with partners to uphold international law. In this respect, we commend those Western Balkan partners that are already fully aligned with the EU's CFSP and urge those that have not yet done so to follow suit. We stress the importance of full implementation and improved enforcement of restrictive measures and the prevention of their circumvention. We welcome partners' continued commitment to the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), including the contribution to EU's missions and operations.[9]

Currently, the EU Commission is warming up to strengthening governance on the Democracy shield and is considering transposing the Council of Europe Framework Convention into an EU regulation on Minorities to ensure leverage at the negotiation table, only. It is also following policy advice on how to strengthen the Pristina-dialogue and is looking forward to reengage Bulgaria and Macedonia, as it is still to grasp how to better align SECEP with the EU enlarge-ment , something that hinges on the both the EU-Turkey relations and the administrative reorganisation of EEAS's Eurarc-unit (Ilcus, 2025)

In summary, these measures transform enlargement from a technical process into a strategic governance project. They reinforce the EU's credibility, enhance regional stability, and create a more predictable pathway toward accession—one that aligns with the guardrails of rule-of-law, minority protection, anti-corruption integrity, regional cooperation, democratic resilience, and external-relations stability.

21. The EU as a Foreign Policy Actor in its Own World: Assessment, Limitations, and Governance Strengthening

The European Union occupies a unique position in global affairs. Unlike nation-states, the EU is a supranational entity comprising 27 member states, with shared competencies in trade, diplomacy, development, and security. Its foreign policy is thus a hybrid of collective action, normative projection, and strategic coordination, rather than a conventional state-led coercive power. This distinctive nature both enables influence and creates structural constraints.

The **enlargement strategy** exemplifies the EU's long-term approach to shaping its environment. By offering membership incentives, the EU exports political, legal, and economic norms beyond its borders, leveraging structural influence to shape governance practices, democratization trajectories, and economic models in neighboring countries. Enlargement strengthens regional stability, creates markets aligned with EU standards, and consolidates the EU's identity as a normative power. However, significant limitations have emerged. Enlargement fatigue, political resistance within member states, and external geopolitical pushback, particularly from Russia and increasingly from China, highlight the boundaries of the EU's influence. Moreover, uneven implementation of democratic and rule-of-law standards within candidate countries—and occasionally within the EU itself—has undermined credibility. Strengthening this instrument requires a **clearer, consistent enlargement roadmap**, mechanisms to enforce rule-of-law compliance, and enhanced political backing from all member states to sustain momentum and signal commitment externally.

Subregional engagement extends the EU's reach beyond formal membership, fostering conflict mitigation, economic integration, and norm diffusion in regions such as the Western Balkans, the Black Sea, and the Eastern Partnership. These programs demonstrate the EU's preventive capacity, shaping environments to reduce the likelihood of future crises. Yet subregional engagement has

9 https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/wvld5ka1/brussels-declaration-2024-en.pdf

revealed weaknesses. Without the binding power of membership, the EU struggles to enforce reforms or resolve entrenched disputes. Progress is often slow, hampered by weak institutions, local political rivalries, and overlapping initiatives that reduce coherence. To strengthen this pillar, the EU should **integrate subregional programs into a coherent strategic framework**, linking them explicitly to enlargement or partnership incentives, and increase resources for monitoring, capacity-building, and regional governance support.

Crisis management illustrates the EU's reactive capabilities in conflict and humanitarian situations. Through diplomatic mediation, sanctions, emergency aid, and civilian missions, the EU can influence conflict dynamics and stabilize fragile contexts. Operationally, it demonstrates the ability to act even when structural instruments, such as enlargement, are unavailable. Yet institutional and operational weaknesses limit effectiveness. Consensus-based decision-making slows response times, military capabilities remain fragmented, and credibility can be questioned by external actors who perceive the EU as politically partial. Strengthening crisis management demands **streamlined decision-making processes, enhanced rapid deployment mechanisms, and a more credible integrated civilian-military capacity**, coupled with consistent diplomatic messaging to reinforce legitimacy.

Taken together, these three instruments—enlargement, subregional engagement, and crisis management—form a coherent framework for understanding the EU as a foreign policy actor. Their combined effect is greater than the sum of individual tools. Enlargement establishes structural foundations for influence, subregional engagement consolidates stability and alignment with EU norms, and crisis management enables swift action when urgent challenges arise. The integrated approach highlights that the EU's foreign policy power depends on coordination, credibility, and the ability to leverage normative, economic, and coercive tools simultaneously.

Yet the EU's global role remains constrained in critical ways. Political fragmentation among member states weakens consensus and credibility. Strategic coordination across instruments is often lacking, resulting in missed opportunities or conflicting signals. The diffuse nature of power within the EU, while a source of legitimacy, also slows decision-making and reduces agility. Externally, rival powers exploit these weaknesses, limiting the EU's influence in contested regions.

Recommendations to strengthen EU governance and global role:

1. **Enhance internal cohesion and decision-making**: Develop mechanisms for faster, qualified-majority decision-making in foreign policy to allow timely responses to crises and geopolitical shifts.
2. **Clarify strategic priorities**: Define a long-term foreign policy vision linking enlargement, subregional engagement, and crisis management with measurable objectives and external signaling.
3. **Institutional capacity building**: Strengthen the EEAS and CSDP structures, including civilian-military rapid response units, to provide credible operational capabilities.
4. **Leverage conditionality consistently**: Apply rules-based incentives in enlargement and subregional initiatives to reinforce governance and democratic standards without appearing arbitrary or selective.
5. **Integrated external communication**: Coordinate EU messaging to enhance credibility, ensure alignment across member states, and counter external narratives from rival powers.
6. **Resilient financing and resource allocation**: Ensure predictable funding for regional cooperation, crisis response, and capacity-building programs, linking resources to strategic objectives.

Figure

In conclusion, the EU represents a distinctive model of foreign policy projection. Its power is diffuse, layered, and highly dependent on legitimacy, partnerships, and strategic sequencing. Enlargement, subregional engagement, and crisis management collectively provide a toolkit that is uniquely suited to a normative, strategic, and multilateral world. However, internal fragmentation, limited military capacity, and inconsistent application of incentives constrain effectiveness. Strengthening governance, clarifying strategic priorities, and integrating the EU's instruments more coherently would allow the Union to better assert influence, stabilize its neighborhood, and enhance its credibility as a global actor.

Explicandum for the EU Governance Strengthening Framework" Infographic

The infographic titled **"EU Governance Strengthening Framework"** visually summarizes the EU's primary instruments for foreign policy—**Enlargement Strategy, Subregional Engagement, and Crisis Management**—and links them directly to proposed governance reforms designed to strengthen the EU's global role. At the center of the diagram is the overarching objective: **Enhancing EU Foreign Policy Effectiveness**. Each instrument is represented as a distinct node with its strategic focus: Enlargement Strategy emphasizes a clearer roadmap and consistent conditionality; Subregional Engagement emphasizes the integration of strategic frameworks across regions; and Crisis Management emphasizes faster and credible response capability. Arrows connecting these nodes indicate their mutual reinforcement, highlighting that the EU's effectiveness depends on the coordination of long-term structural influence, preventive engagement, and reactive capabilities.

The lower section of the infographic explicitly outlines **proposed reforms** to strengthen governance and global role. These reforms include **Enhanced Decision-Making** (facilitating qualified-majority decisions and faster responses), **Clear Strategic Priorities** (ensuring unified vision and measurable goals), **Institutional Capacity Building** (strengthening the EEAS and CSDP capabilities), **Integrated External Messaging** (coordinated communication to enhance credibility), and **Resilient Financing & Resources** (predictable and strategic investments). The arrows connecting reforms to the three instruments indicate how structural changes support and amplify each policy tool, ensuring that improvements in governance translate directly into enhanced foreign policy outcomes. Icons and color coding enhance clarity: blue for structural/strategic instruments, green for integration/preventive measures, orange for reactive/crisis tools, and the reform boxes in gradient tones signify actionable, cross-cutting interventions.

Observations on Organisation and Goal Fulfilment

1. **Clear Organization of Instruments:** The infographic organizes the EU's foreign policy instruments into a logical triangular structure, with Enlargement Strategy, Subregional Engagement, and Crisis Management forming interconnected nodes. This layout effectively communicates that no single instrument operates in isolation; the EU's effectiveness derives from the interplay of structural, preventive, and reactive tools.
2. **Linkage to Reforms:** The lower section maps specific governance reforms to the three instruments, making the causal relationship explicit: for example, enhancing decision-making supports both crisis management and subregional engagement, while institutional capacity building strengthens all three pillars. This demonstrates a direct pathway from governance improvements to practical policy outcomes.
3. **Visual Clarity and Cognitive Flow:** The arrows and color coding guide the reader's eye, showing both the internal interactions among the instruments and the way reforms feed into them. The central placement of "Enhancing EU Foreign Policy Effectiveness" reinforces the overarching objective and anchors the diagram.
4. **Goal Fulfilment Assessment:** The infographic effectively illustrates **what the EU aims to achieve**—coordinated, credible, and effective foreign policy—while highlighting **current limitations** and **areas for strengthening**. It clarifies that the EU's objectives are not fully realized due to slow decision-making, fragmented capacity, inconsistent conditionality, and limited rapid-response mechanisms. The framework also demonstrates that aligning strategic instruments with governance reforms is essential for full goal fulfillment.
5. **Observations on Gaps and Opportunities:** While the infographic clearly maps instruments to reforms, it could be enhanced by including **feedback loops** showing how successful implementation of reforms in one instrument (e.g., Crisis Management) feeds back into structural tools (e.g., Enlargement Strategy) to reinforce credibility externally. This would emphasize the iterative nature of EU foreign policy, where improvements in governance not only support operational objectives but also strengthen long-term normative influence.

Provided the EEAS resolutely delivers on the threat analysis linking up with force generation and capability development tuning in with the Helsinki Headline Goals of 60,000 men and women under arms and as standing forces[10], things suddenly starts looking reasonably well-administered to the reassurance of citizens and for the

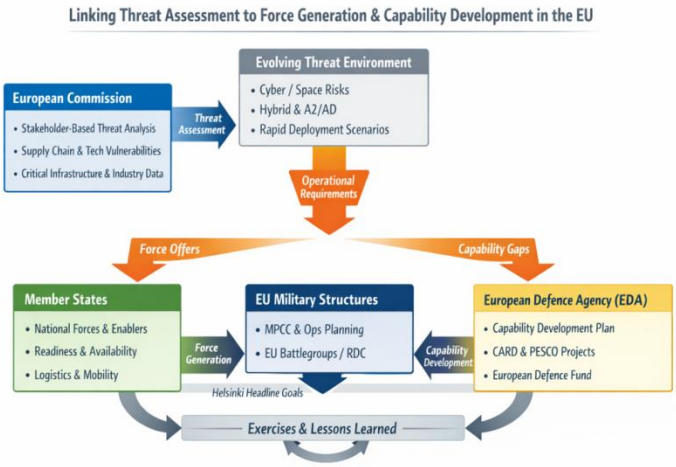
[10] https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/towards-coherent-csdp-strategy-force-generation-future-ilcus-oisaf/?trackingId=mKY8FOe9QumerXGvDa3Llg%3D%3D

deterrence of Russia (Jones, 2025).

In essence, the infographic is both an **analytic tool**—explaining EU capabilities, limitations, and reforms—and a **strategic roadmap**—showing how governance changes can directly enhance foreign policy outcomes. It successfully communicates that the EU's role as a global actor depends on the integrated operation of its instruments, supported by coherent internal governance and resource alignment. Add this interaction effects from the network society and feedback from both stakeholders and partners.

22. Towards a Professional Defense Organisation

Figure



The Commission's threat assessment must then be translated into operational and functional requirements. This step identifies the conditions under which EU forces must operate, the scale and speed of deployment required, and the domains in which vulnerabilities are most acute—whether in logistics, cyber and space resilience, industrial surge capacity, or energy and supply chains. These requirements serve as a baseline for force generation, ensuring that Member State contributions are evaluated against real-world constraints and operational necessity rather than ad hoc or purely political criteria. EU military structures, including the EU Military Staff and the Military Planning and Conduct Capability, use this baseline to develop force packages, readiness cycles, and deployment planning assumptions, but the analytical foundation is provided by Commission-led, evidence-based assessments.

Force generation itself remains a Member State responsibility, but its credibility is measured against historical and operational benchmarks. The **Helsinki Headline Goals**, established in 1999, provide a useful reference point: they demonstrated how agreed levels of ambition, scenario-based planning, and national contributions can be coordinated to produce deployable forces at EU level. By revisiting these principles in light of a dynamic, multi-domain threat environment, the EU can ensure that force generation is not symbolic but operationally feasible, with readiness, deployability, and sustainment linked directly to identified vulnerabilities.

Capability development is where the European Defence Agency (EDA) plays a critical role. Building on Commission-driven threat analysis and force generation assessments, the EDA consolidates Member State inputs, identifies capability shortfalls, and translates operational gaps into concrete investment priorities. Instruments such as the Capability Development Plan and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) enable the EDA to align capability planning with actual operational requirements. Through PESCO projects, joint procurement, and coordination with the European Defence Fund, the EDA ensures that investment decisions address critical gaps—

Linking the evolving threat environment to force generation and capability development in the EU requires a clear, evidence-driven connection between analysis, operational planning, and capability investment, grounded in the realities of Member State contributions, industrial capacity, and multi-domain threats. At the center of this process is the European Commission, which undertakes a **stakeholder-based, cross-domain analysis of the threat environment**. By integrating input from Member States, industry, research institutions, and critical infrastructure operators, the Commission can identify not only adversary capabilities and intent but also systemic vulnerabilities in European resilience, logistics, and technological independence. This ensures that the threat picture reflects operational reality rather than political aspiration.

whether in ISR, cyber resilience, air and missile defence, strategic lift, or sustainment stockpiles—rather than reflecting historical preferences or fragmented national planning. In this way, capability development becomes a targeted response to systemic risks identified through stakeholder-driven threat analysis and validated against operational realities.

Crucially, the system operates as a continuous feedback loop. Commission-led threat assessments are updated as industrial capacity, technology, and adversary behaviour evolve. Force generation assumptions are stress-tested against these updates, exercises, and operational lessons. The EDA then adjusts capability priorities and recommends coordinated investment. The cycle ensures that EU defence planning is adaptive, evidence-based, and operationally credible, rather than document-heavy or declaratory.

In this framework, each actor has a clearly defined role: the Commission leads in cross-domain threat assessment; Member States provide forces and resources; EU military structures translate requirements into operational plans; and the EDA drives capability development aligned with operational gaps and industrial reality. Historical lessons from the Helsinki Headline Goals underscore the importance of scenario-based coordination and readiness as the bridge between strategic analysis and deployable forces. Together, this integrated approach ensures that EU force generation and capability development are credible, resilient, and directly responsive to the evolving threat environment.

According to a recent wargame reported in Wall Street Journal, The European Union's vulnerability to a potential Russian attack lies less in aggregate economic or demographic weakness than in readiness, cohesion, and speed of response. Recent wargaming cited by the *Wall Street Journal* suggests that Russia could exploit short warning times and concentrated forces to achieve limited territorial gains before a coordinated European response materializes . The most acute risks are located on the EU's eastern flank, particularly in the Baltic region and the Suwałki Corridor, where geography and force imbalances favor rapid escalation. European armed forces remain constrained by limited troop depth, ammunition shortages, and insufficient high-readiness formations for sustained high-intensity conflict. Logistical bottlenecks and slow cross-border military mobility further reduce the EU's capacity to reinforce threatened areas quickly. Political decision-making constitutes an additional vulnerability, as unanimity requirements and escalation hesitancy may delay timely action. Hybrid tactics—cyberattacks, disinformation, and sabotage—could further complicate early response and undermine public confidence. At the same time, the EU is not strategically defenseless, as most member states benefit from NATO's collective defense framework and U.S. deterrence. Ongoing increases in defense spending and industrial output are gradually reducing capability gaps, but these efforts are incomplete. Overall, the EU is most vulnerable in the early phase of a crisis, when political hesitation and readiness shortfalls could allow an adversary to establish faits accomplis before collective defense fully engages.[11]

Once the situation on the ground has been analysed and the sense of security, have been understood, you need to get your *hexie* right to ensure correct interventions to ensure a balanced and harmony between the Union's policies and the needs, what matters and the conflicts of the members of Europe's sub-regional organisations in a manner that does not away with all the policy wonks. We are servants.

Now, the objectives of the CFSP include preserving peace and international security by preventing conflicts and contributing to crisis management both in Europe and globally. It aims to strengthen international security through support for disarmament, non-proliferation, and conflict resolution. Promoting international cooperation is also central, engaging multilaterally through the UN, OSCE, and other global institutions. The CFSP seeks to develop and consolidate democracy by encouraging democratic institutions, human rights, and the rule of law worldwide. Protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms is a key objective, actively supporting human rights, the protection of minorities, and humanitarian norms. The CFSP promotes the rule of law and good governance by encouraging accountable governance, transparency, and anti-corruption initiatives. It supports sustainable development by integrating development objectives with foreign policy to ensure stability and prosperity. Finally, it strengthens the EU's international influence, enhancing Europe's ability to act as a coherent global actor.

The core values underpinning the CFSP emphasize peaceful conflict resolution, with a commitment to diplomacy, mediation, and negotiation, and respect for international law, upholding treaties, UN resolutions, and international norms. Democracy and the rule of law are central, supporting governance systems that respect civil liberties and the separation of powers. Human rights and fundamental freedoms are central to EU identity and external action. Solidarity among EU member states is essential, ensuring decisions reflect collective European positions rather than unilateral national agendas. Lastly, sustainability and responsibility are prioritized, recognizing the link between global stability, economic development, and environmental stewardship.

[11] https://www.wsj.com/world/europe/a-wargame-shows-just-how-vulnerable-europe-is-to-a-russian-attack-12dfdbfa?gaa_at=eafs&gaa_n=AWEtsqeVWQIIsAbpwwWNdxP0usxAhkeioqtXdzgsOSv-eW-diC54tf2WTBAZrTBzOJs%3D&gaa_ts=69870027&gaa_sig=oaJJQVcIz3E5fTMWTGF13Gg25KZ7PnYdIo8YIjSrpvMmN6_-rL9HAC3Xgi0YEpQqT6rSeNFpWWcz809-qAm14g%3D%3D

Table CFSP and Sub-regionals Crosstab

CFSP Objective / Value	Pertinent EU Interventions	BSEC	UfM	Arctic Council	CBSS	SECEP	KPI / Measurement
Preserve Peace & Security	EU crisis management missions, conflict prevention, joint exercises	Support regional security dialogues, maritime security initiatives	Promote stability in Mediterranean conflicts, border security cooperation	Cooperation on Arctic search & rescue, emergency response	Maritime security coordination, CBSS Conflict Prevention Network	Support security sector reform, cross-border policing	Number of joint security initiatives; reduction in conflict incidents; improved regional risk indicators
Strengthen International Security	Arms control, non-proliferation, counter-terrorism support	Maritime security, countering illicit trafficking	Counter-terrorism capacity building, cybersecurity	Arctic safety standards, environmental security	Anti-trafficking initiatives, cybersecurity workshops	Regional counter-terrorism cooperation, law enforcement training	Adoption of EU security standards; number of participants trained; reduction in security threats
Promote International Cooperation	Dialogue platforms, multilateral frameworks, joint projects	Facilitation of regional cooperation projects, trade dialogues	Mediterranean investment and energy dialogues	Scientific and environmental collaboration	Baltic Sea strategy alignment	Regional infrastructure and transport cooperation	Number of signed cooperation agreements; joint projects implemented; policy harmonization metrics
Develop & Consolidate Democracy	Governance support, election observation, institutional capacity building	Support rule-of-law programs, public administration reform	Support civil society, democratic governance programs	N/A (observer and consultative role)	Promote transparent governance, civil society engagement	Promote administrative reform, anti-corruption initiatives	Number of governance reforms implemented; improved governance indices; civil society engagement metrics
Protect Human Rights & Freedoms	Human rights dialogues, minority rights programs, humanitarian assistance	Minority rights programs, anti-discrimination workshops	Refugee/migrant protection, human rights projects	Indigenous peoples' rights programs	Gender equality, human rights monitoring	Minority protection and social inclusion programs	Number of initiatives implemented; measurable improvements in rights protection indices
Promote Rule of Law & Good Governance	Legal reform assistance, anti-corruption initiatives	Judicial reform support, anti-corruption	Regulatory harmonization, governance workshops	Environmental law standards	Rule-of-law training, judicial cooperation	Public administration reform, transparency programs	Number of reforms; corruption perception improvement; legal

		capacity building					harmonization metrics
Support Sustainable Development	Environmental projects, energy transition, climate adaptation	Energy and environmental projects, Black Sea pollution reduction	Renewable energy initiatives, sustainable urban development	Arctic environmental monitoring, climate mitigation projects	Baltic Sea environmental protection projects	Sustainable infrastructure, transport, and energy programs	Reduction in pollution; adoption of renewable projects; climate adaptation indices
Strengthen EU Influence	Strategic dialogues, project funding, normative alignment	Alignment of regional policies with EU norms	Mediterranean energy & infrastructure leadership	Arctic science diplomacy	CBSS strategy alignment with EU policies	SECEP integration with EU frameworks	Policy adoption rate; project funding leveraged; influence in regional governance forums

In shaping the EU's external action, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) provides the overarching framework through which objectives, values, and strategic interventions are defined, coordinated, and assessed. The CFSP is grounded in the principle that Europe's security, prosperity, and influence are interdependent with the stability, governance, and resilience of its neighboring regions. Its objectives—preserving peace and international security, strengthening international security, promoting cooperation, consolidating democracy, protecting human rights, fostering the rule of law, supporting sustainable development, and enhancing EU influence—serve as the normative and operational guideposts for engagement across sub-regional organizations. The CFSP's core values, including peaceful conflict resolution, respect for international law, democratic governance, human rights, solidarity among member states, and sustainability, provide the ethical and legal foundations that anchor EU interventions and ensure coherence across instruments.

Applying CFSP logic to the EU's engagement in sub-regional frameworks demonstrates a calibrated approach where values and objectives are operationalized according to regional context. In the **Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC)**, for instance, EU interventions emphasize regional security dialogues, maritime safety initiatives, and economic connectivity projects that align with the CFSP's peace, cooperation, and security objectives. The **Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)** serves as a platform to promote political stability, economic integration, and governance reforms in North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean, reflecting the CFSP's emphasis on democracy, human rights, and sustainable development. Within the **Arctic Council**, the EU leverages scientific cooperation, environmental protection, and climate adaptation initiatives to advance security and sustainability objectives, while respecting international law and the norms of peaceful conflict resolution. In the **Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS)**, initiatives focus on maritime security, environmental protection, and regional governance, operationalizing CFSP goals of cooperation, rule of law, and sustainable development. In **South East Europe through the SECEP**, EU support targets security sector reform, judicial capacity building, and cross-border cooperation, directly linking to the CFSP's priorities of security, governance, and regional stability.

It should be noted that we have **omitted the Visegrád Four, the Central European Initiative, and the Gulf Cooperation Council** from this analysis not for reasons of neglect or dismissal, but to maintain analytical parsimony. Their inclusion, while relevant to specific bilateral or multilateral dynamics, would risk diluting the focus on the sub-regional platforms where the EU's CFSP-driven interventions have the most clearly defined institutional frameworks and measurable impact. By concentrating on BSEC, UfM, Arctic Council, CBSS, and SECEP, the analysis retains clarity, emphasizing how CFSP objectives are systematically translated into actionable interventions, monitored through KPIs, and aligned with EU normative and strategic priorities.

This approach illustrates the CFSP's practical logic: objectives and values define the desired end state; sub-regional organizations provide the operational venues; EU interventions constitute the instruments; and measurable indicators allow assessment of effectiveness. Through this structured engagement, the EU can project influence, reinforce norms, and enhance regional stability while remaining consistent with its foundational principles.

Cases Illustrative Exemples

As a matter of fact already the Situation Center was drowning in data on the world conflicts that the member

states couldnt care more about that the obejctives and values hasn't match once with the interests of the member states, since no eu troops, no conflict management has been addressed in a an integrated and coherent manner except perhaps for the coordinated maritime presence off Somalia and the Guinea Bay. All other missions save one has been motivated by the raw material interests of one or several member states leading to the deployment of troops or rather to EU-civilian-military mission. Soldiers not only like to stretch their legs, the deterioatation of the security environment is now so obvious that there soon enough is no way back from general conflict, something there is consensus about amongst the Military Intelligence will brake out with Russia, if the EU does respond and defend and fight back against the hundereds of incidents having occurred since the second invasion of Ukraine.

.Tabel 1 Cross/tab Conflict Phases x Priority Instruments

Phase of Interaction	Risk Characteristics	Geopoltical Priorities	Geoeconomic Prorities	Dominant Theories	Key Instruments
Phase 0 Structural Peace Latent Comp	Rivalry without crisis; long-term mistrust	Preservie predictability, sh ape incentives	Mutual gain and cost of disruption	Liberal institutionalism and interdependence	Trade regimes, legal framework and integration pathways
Phase 1: Strategic Competetoin	Assertive signaling, influence operations	Clarify red lines; avoid ambiguity	Reduce asymmetric deopendence	Sweceurity dilemma mititgation	Transparency measures, CBMS and diversification
Phase 2: Grey-Zone Pressure	Hybrid actions, coercion below war threshold	Deny gains without escalation	Shield critical sectors	Etereence by denial and resilience theory	Sanctions readiness, cyber defense and strategic reserves
Phase 3: Acute Poltical Crisis	Miscalculation risk; mobilization hetoric	Crisis communication; escalation control	Prevent financialpanic	Esacalation management and signaling theory	Hotlines, back, market stabilisation tools.
Phase 4: Military Proximity/Incidents	Accidental clashes possible	Prevent incidents becoming battles	Insulate civilian economy	Deconfliction theory	Rules of Enaggement, separation zones, incident protocols
Phase 5: Limited Armed Conflict Risk	Deliberate use of force considered	Raise costs and preserve off ramps	Preserve post-conflict recoverability	Coercive diplomacy	Targetted sanctons and diplomatic ultimatums
Phase 6: Wr Onset (failure case)	Open hostilities	Contvain escalation	Economic warfare	Total detereence	Full sanctions and alliance activation

Europe's near Abroad:

Now, conflicts of a geopolitical nature are characterised

In the early phases of conflict structural tools will normally prevail, in the later phases behavioral & operational tools and then deconfliction only appears late because it cannot solve solve political causes. A common failure is the use of Phase 4 tools deconfliction to Phase 2 problems grey-zone coercion.

Geopolitical versus geoeconomic balance: geopolitics focuses on intent, signaling, military posture, whereas geoeconomics focuses on leverage, resilience and substitution. If geoeconomic tools are used too early and too harshly, they can hard-lock adversaries, collapse diplomatic space and accelerate military timelines. Hence the need for gradual applicationEarly warning indicators looks like a phase One with sudden military exercises, diplomatic rhetoric hardening, with phase 2 with energy leverage, cyper operations and trade weaponization, phase three with capital flight and embassy drawdowns and

phase 4 with near-misse incidents and unsafe intercepts. Each indicator triggers predefined tools, not ad hoc reactions.

Security dilemma dynamics go unmanaged in phase 1 and 2, geoeconomic cordiion hardens identities instead of incentives and deconfliction is mistaken for conflict prevenrtion. The correct sequence is institutions > Detereence > Crisis Management > Deconfliction. Not the other Way around.

Applied in a non-causal illustrative manner" means using a concept, framework, or dataset **to show patterns, relationships, or structure without implying cause-and-effect.** It focuses on **description, visualization, or conceptual demonstration,** rather than predicting outcomes, assigning blame, or asserting that one factor directly produces another.

A **dashboard as a management device** can be defined as a structured, visual, and often interactive tool that consolidates key metrics, indicators, and information into a single overview to support decision-making, monitoring, and strategic guidance. It presents data in a format that is easily digestible, highlighting trends, risks, priorities, and performance across relevant dimensions, enabling managers or decision-makers to identify emerging issues, compare scenarios, and coordinate responses efficiently.

Dashboards are used to inform strategic, operational, and tactical decisions without requiring deep analysis of raw data. They allow for rapid situational awareness, tracking of performance against objectives, early identification of anomalies, and communication of priorities across teams or organizations. In security and geopolitical contexts, dashboards can visualize risk levels, escalation phases, and preventive measures, serving as a management device to maintain control, guide resource allocation, and coordinate response actions

Operational Scenarios

1.Arctic Region Dashboard

(High North, Arctic Ocean, Barents Sea; Arctic states + China as stakeholder)

Strategic Risk Profile

- Historically cooperative, now **securitizing fast**
- Military buildup + climate-driven access
- **High accident risk, low political intent for war**

Phase-Based Dashboard

Phase	Key Indicators	Priority Objective	Geopolitical Tools	Geoeconomic Tools
Phase 0 Structural Peace	Scientific cooperation, low force posture	Preserve low-tension norms	Arctic Council, CBMs	Joint research, environmental regimes
Phase 1 Strategic Competition	Base upgrades, patrol frequency	Prevent misinterpretation	Transparency, military notifications	Dual-use infrastructure screening
Phase 2 Gray Zone	GPS jamming, survey ship harassment	Deny normalization of coercion	Attribution, signaling restraint	Port access rules, insurance standards
Phase 3 Acute Crisis	Close encounters, airspace violations	Prevent incidents	Crisis hotlines, command-level talks	Shipping risk backstops
Phase 4 Military Incidents	Collisions, unsafe intercepts	Avoid escalation	Deconfliction protocols, ROEs	Protect supply chains

Phase 5 Escalation Risk	Militarization of choke points	Reassert strategic stability	Strategic dialogue	Selective sanctions (last resort)

Red Lines to Monitor

- Armed interference with civilian/scientific vessels
- Militarization of Arctic shipping chokepoints
- Persistent disruption of satellite navigation

Key Insight:
The Arctic is **deconfliction-heavy by necessity**, but long-term stability depends on **keeping civilian, scientific, and environmental governance alive**.

2.Suwalki Gap. Suwałki Corridor Dashboard *(Poland–Lithuania corridor between Belarus and Kaliningrad, NATO–Russia interface)*

Strategic Risk Profile The Suwałki Corridor exhibits extreme strategic sensitivity due to its narrow geography connecting the Baltic states to Poland. Military proximity is dense, warning times are minimal, and escalation potential is high. While NATO maintains credible deterrence, the corridor's confined terrain increases the risk of rapid crises and complicates reinforcement and resupply efforts.

Phase-Based Dashboard

Phase	Key Indicators	Priority Objective	Geopolitical Tools	Geoeconomic Tools
Phase 1 Strategic Competition	Large-scale exercises near corridor, ISR flights, military deployments in Kaliningrad and Belarus	Maintain deterrence stability and reassure Baltic allies	Forward defense positioning, transparency measures, high-visibility exercises	Infrastructure hardening, supply chain resilience, energy security reinforcement
Phase 2 Gray Zone	Airspace violations, electronic warfare, disinformation campaigns	Deny ambiguity and prevent incremental gains	Attribution and public messaging through NATO, allied intelligence sharing	Cyber resilience investments, targeted sanctions readiness
Phase 3 Acute Crisis	Border incidents, mobilization rhetoric, signaling maneuvers	Prevent miscalculation and maintain corridor access	Crisis consultations invoking NATO Article 4, joint command coordination	Financial confidence measures, emergency transport and logistics facilitation
Phase 4 Military Incidents	Unsafe military intercepts, roadblocks, hybrid attacks	Stop incident escalation and secure reinforcement routes	Deconfliction lines, communication protocols, INCSEA-style agreements adapted to land operations	Transport and logistics insurance, infrastructure protection funding
Phase 5 Escalation Risk	Direct attacks on military convoys, energy or transport nodes	Raise costs of aggression while preserving control over the corridor	Collective deterrence signaling, NATO rapid response deployment	Targeted sanctions, critical infrastructure hardening, contingency resource allocation

Red Lines to Monitor Kinetic attacks on critical transport or energy infrastructure, sustained military pressure along the

corridor, interference with NATO reinforcement and supply routes.

Key Insight In the Suwałki Corridor, deterrence is credible but exceptionally fragile due to narrow geography and limited depth. The priority is rapid incident management and maintaining corridor access under high-pressure scenarios, rather than strategic persuasion of adversaries.

3.Ukraine & Black Sea Region Dashboard

(Ukraine, Russia, NATO Black Sea states, Moldova)

Strategic Risk Profile

- **Highest escalation risk in Europe**
- Ongoing war → spillover & horizontal escalation risks
- Heavy **military + geoeconomic coupling** (energy, food, shipping)

Phase-Based Dashboard

Phase	Key Inndicators	Priority Objective	Geopoltical tools	Geoeconomic Tools
Phase 1–2 Strategic Competition / Gray Zone	Force posture shifts, hybrid ops in Moldova, Black Sea harassment	Prevent horizontal escalation	Deterrence by denial, force signaling discipline	Energy diversification, food corridor guarantees
Phase 3 Acute Crisis	Strikes near NATO borders, rhetoric on escalation	Preserve escalation control	Crisis hotlines, alliance coordination	Market stabilization, insurance backstopping
Phase 4 Military Proximity	Near-miss incidents (air/naval), drones crossing borders	Avoid NATO–Russia incident	Deconfliction channels, ROE clarity	Insulate shipping, ports, energy transit
Phase 5 Escalation Risk	Explicit nuclear rhetoric, targeting of logistics	Raise costs, preserve off-ramps	Coercive diplomacy, alliance signaling	Sanctions calibration, avoid total decoupling

Red Lines to Monitor

- Direct strikes on NATO territory
- Closure of Black Sea shipping lanes
- Attacks on nuclear or energy infrastructure

Key Insight:
Here, **deconfliction is essential but purely tactical**. Strategic prevention rests on **deterrence + alliance unity + economic resilience**, not dialogue alone.

4. South Caucasus Dashboard

(Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia, Turkey, Iran)

Strategic Risk Profile

- **Post-war instability**

- Weak institutions, strong regional power interference
- High risk of **sudden localized war**, low global attention

Phase-Based Dashboard

Phase	Key Indicators	Priority Objective	Geopolitical Tools	Geoeconomic Tools
Phase 0–1 Latent / Competition	Border skirmishes, rhetoric, force mobilization	Prevent faits accomplis	Preventive diplomacy, observers	Infrastructure interdependence
Phase 2 Gray Zone	Corridor pressure, energy leverage	Deny unilateral gains	Security guarantees-lite, mediation	Conditional investment, transit incentives
Phase 3 Acute Crisis	Border closures, population displacement	Freeze escalation	Shuttle diplomacy, multilateral pressure	Emergency aid, financial backstops
Phase 4 Military Incidents	Cross-border fire, drone strikes	Prevent widening war	Deconfliction via mediators	Insulate pipelines, trade routes
Phase 5 War Risk	Regional power involvement	Contain conflict	Coercive diplomacy	Targeted sanctions, not blanket

Red Lines to Monitor

- Forced territorial changes
- Corridor seizures without agreement
- External military intervention

Key Insight:
This region needs **early, intrusive preventive diplomacy**. Once violence starts, leverage collapses fast.

5. Western Balkans Dashboard

(Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, EU, NATO)

Strategic Risk Profile

- **Low-intensity, chronic instability**
- Identity politics + external influence
- Escalation risk is **political → security**, not military-first

Phase-Based Dashboard

Phase	Key Indicators	Priority Objective	Geopolitical Tools	Geoeconomic Tools
Phase 0 Structural Peace	Institutional erosion, nationalist rhetoric	Preserve institutional legitimacy	EU conditionality, monitoring	Accession-linked funding
Phase 1 Strategic Competition	Police/military mobilization	Prevent securitization	Deterrence by presence (KFOR)	Investment conditionality
Phase 2 Gray Zone	Blockades, parallel institutions	Restore governance	Mediation, legal enforcement	Targeted economic pressure
Phase 3 Acute Crisis	Street violence, border incidents	De-escalate politically	Crisis diplomacy, envoy surge	Financial stabilization
Phase 4 Incidents	Armed clashes, attacks on forces	Contain violence	Deconfliction, force separation	Avoid broad sanctions

Red Lines to Monitor

- Armed forces politicization
- Withdrawal from peace agreements
- Attacks on international missions

Key Insight:
Here, **geoeconomics and legitimacy matter more than firepower**. EU leverage is decisive if used consistently.

Summary

The comparative assessment of five strategic regions highlights distinct risk profiles and corresponding prevention levers. In Ukraine and the broader Black Sea, the dominant concern is deliberate escalation, addressed primarily through robust deterrence measures reinforced by alliance cohesion. In the South Caucasus, sudden, localized conflicts arising from unresolved territorial or ethnic tensions underscore the need for early mediation and proactive conflict resolution. The Western Balkans exhibit a trajectory in which political drift can translate into security vulnerabilities, mitigated through institutional conditionality and governance-based incentives. The Arctic is characterized by accidents and miscalculations in a high-intensity operational and environmental context, managed through deconfliction mechanisms supported by established norms and communication protocols. The Baltic region, with its dense military proximity and rapid operational tempos, faces incident-driven escalation, countered by a combination of deterrence and systematic incident management.

Across these five regions, a unifying insight emerges: deconfliction functions as the principal tool to prevent inadvertent crises; deterrence shapes the intentions and behavior of actors; geoeconomic instruments influence the pace and timing of developments; and institutional frameworks establish expectations, providing predictable pathways for engagement. Together, these levers illustrate that effective regional stability relies on a multidimensional approach, integrating military, economic, and normative strategies rather than relying on any single modality.

It is imperative that EU military formations shift from abstract readiness benchmarks to **scenario-driven exercising**, explicitly aligned with the most plausible contingencies along Europe's eastern and southeastern flanks, and report back in operational terms that battlestations are ready.

For the Suwałki Corridor, this implies preparing for high-intensity, short-warning combined-arms conflict aimed at isolating the Baltic States from the rest of NATO and the EU. EU formations must exercise rapid reinforcement under contested air and electronic conditions, integrated air and missile defence, counter-A2/AD operations, and sustained logistics across a narrow and vulnerable land bridge. Readiness reporting should demonstrate the ability to deploy credible combat power within days, not weeks, and to operate seamlessly with NATO command structures while retaining EU-specific political and decision-making autonomy.

For the Caucasus, this implies readiness for indirect and hybrid contingencies rather than large-scale conventional war. EU forces should train for crisis response missions involving escalation control, protection of critical infrastructure and transport corridors, maritime security in the Black Sea, and stabilisation operations in environments shaped by Russian, Turkish, and Iranian influence. Exercises must emphasise intelligence fusion, cyber resilience, unmanned systems, and the protection of EU economic and energy interests, with clear reporting on the ability to deploy tailored force packages rapidly and sustain them politically and logistically.

For the Baltic region more broadly, this implies persistent forward presence and the capacity to operate under constant pressure below the threshold of open war. EU formations should exercise defence against hybrid attacks, long-range fires, missile and drone saturation, and disruption of civilian-military interfaces, including ports, energy networks, and digital infrastructure. Readiness assessments must show that forces can endure prolonged high-tempo operations, maintain command and control under heavy electronic warfare, and reassure allied populations through visible, credible, and sustained military posture.

Real-world scenarios, compared to stylized dashboards, are characterized by **complexity, uncertainty, dynamism, and incomplete information**. Unlike dashboards, which present a simplified, structured, and often idealized view of key indicators and phases, actual situations involve multiple interacting variables, unpredictable behavior of actors, and overlapping events that do not always align neatly with predefined categories or metrics.

Key characteristics include:

- **Ambiguity and noise:** Signals in real situations may be unclear, contradictory, or delayed, whereas dashboards abstract and clarify these signals.
- **Nonlinearity and feedback loops:** Events influence one another in ways that are often nonlinear, producing cascading effects that a stylized dashboard may not capture.
- **Multiple actors and motives:** Real-world outcomes emerge from the interplay of diverse stakeholders with competing objectives, unlike the simplified representation in dashboards.
- **Time-sensitive evolution:** Situations change continuously, sometimes faster than the refresh rate of a dashboard, requiring judgment and adaptation.

- **Partial observability:** Information may be missing or unreliable, while dashboards rely on clearly defined and measured indicators.

In essence, stylized dashboards are **analytical abstractions** designed to guide understanding and decision-making, while real-world scenarios are **messy, interdependent, and emergent**, demanding interpretation, intuition, and flexible management.

24.Ensuring Congruence between interventions and budgetlines

It goes beyond saying that once Member state troops have been made available to the EU, it is the Parliament that has to provide its consent to their deployment, in return for which the EU budgetline for defence matters covers the costs of keeping them ready and deployable rather than the charming collection of post colonial cigarboxes currently in vogue in Bruxelles.

To operationalize the CFSP in a way that produces measurable outcomes, it is essential to align interventions across sub-regional organizations with **dedicated EU financial instruments** managed or coordinated by the EEAS. These instruments include, for example, the **European Peace Facility (EPF), the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI/Global Europe), and specific CFSP crisis management funds**. The strategic logic is straightforward: objectives define the desired outcomes, interventions specify the operational approach, and financial instruments provide the necessary resources to implement and sustain these initiatives.

Ensuring this linkage requires several complementary steps:

1. **Mapping Objectives to Instruments:** Each CFSP objective should be explicitly linked to financial instruments capable of delivering tangible results. For instance, regional security dialogues in BSEC or SECEP can be supported through the **EPF**, while governance, human rights, and development projects in UfM or CBSS are more suited to **NDICI allocations**. Environmental and climate initiatives in the Arctic Council can leverage NDICI or specialized thematic EU funds.
2. **Integrated Program Design:** Projects and initiatives should be designed with both strategic and financial coherence in mind. This includes setting clear goals aligned with CFSP objectives, defining deliverables, and establishing monitoring and evaluation frameworks that correspond to EEAS reporting requirements. By embedding financial planning in the project design phase, the EU ensures that resources are effectively used to advance strategic priorities rather than being fragmented across ad hoc activities.
3. **Prioritization and Coherence:** The EEAS must coordinate allocations across sub-regional frameworks to avoid duplication, ensure complementarity, and concentrate resources where impact is highest. This requires a **strategic prioritization mechanism**, where interventions in BSEC, UfM, Arctic Council, CBSS, and SECEP are evaluated against EU strategic priorities, regional needs, and CFSP objectives.
4. **Monitoring and KPIs:** Financial instruments should be tied to measurable indicators aligned with CFSP objectives. For example, EPF funding for maritime security initiatives could be assessed by the number of joint exercises conducted and reduction in illicit trafficking incidents. NDICI funding for governance programs can track judicial reforms, civil society engagement, or adoption of anti-corruption measures. This ensures accountability and allows the EU to demonstrate both efficiency and strategic impact.
5. **Flexible and Adaptive Management:** Strategic use of EEAS-controlled funds requires flexibility to respond to evolving geopolitical developments, crises, or emerging

opportunities. Financial instruments must be structured to allow rapid deployment where needed, particularly in conflict prevention, humanitarian response, or security cooperation.

6. **Linking Funding to Policy Narratives:** Every financial allocation should be embedded in a **strategic narrative**, making clear how funding supports EU norms, stabilizes regions, and reinforces international law, democracy, and human rights. This narrative ensures coherence between operational activity and high-level CFSP objectives, providing both internal guidance for EU institutions and external signaling to partner countries.

The growing complexity of sub-regional cooperation across Europe, the Mediterranean, the Arctic, and the Gulf underscores the need for a dedicated financial instrument to support EU engagement at the sub-regional level. Current mechanisms often rely on a patchwork of EU programs, member state contributions, and ad hoc project financing, which limits the EU's ability to respond flexibly and strategically to emerging regional priorities. A dedicated financial instrument would allow the EEAS to exercise **greater steering capacity**, ensuring that funding is directly aligned with EU normative frameworks, strategic objectives, and long-term regional development goals.

Sub-regional organizations increasingly address issues that are transnational in nature, such as climate change, energy connectivity, digital infrastructure, migration, and regional security. These challenges require coordinated, multi-year programs rather than isolated projects. A financial instrument would provide predictable and **scalable funding**, enabling the EEAS to implement integrated initiatives across sectors and sub-regions, ensuring continuity and amplifying the EU's influence. It would also strengthen the EU's credibility as a partner, demonstrating tangible commitment to the stability, prosperity, and institutional capacity of the sub-regional organizations it engages with.

Moreover, a dedicated instrument would enhance the EU's **strategic agility**. In crisis situations—whether political, economic, or environmental—the EEAS could deploy funds rapidly to support mitigation, reconstruction, or confidence-building measures, reinforcing the EU's role as a stabilizing actor. The instrument would also provide leverage to incentivize reforms, align regional policies with EU standards, and foster cross-border cooperation in line with EU strategic priorities. By pooling resources under a single instrument, the EU could achieve greater **administrative efficiency**, reduce fragmentation in programming, and facilitate coherent monitoring and evaluation of results.

Finally, such an instrument would strengthen the EU's long-term **capacity to shape regional governance**. Beyond short-term project delivery, it would support institutional development within sub-regional organizations, including training, technical assistance, and joint policy design. This not only enhances the sustainability of EU interventions but also reinforces the EU's normative and operational influence, allowing it to act as a credible interlocutor and strategic partner in complex, multi-level governance contexts.

In sum, a sub-regional financial instrument is likely to become a **strategic necessity**. It would enable the EEAS to synchronize financial, technical, and policy tools, increase the EU's flexibility and credibility, and ensure that engagement at the summit, senior official, and working committee levels translates into tangible, sustainable outcomes across diverse sub-regions. Without such an instrument, the EU risks underutilizing its political leverage, limiting its steering capacity, and weakening its capacity to consolidate regional stability and development in areas of strategic interest.

25. European Union Policy on Hybrid Threats: Strategic Adaptation and the 2026 Council Conclusions

The concept of hybrid threats has gained significant prominence within contemporary security studies and policy formulation, reflecting the deep transformation of the international security environment. Within the framework of the European Union's (EU) security and defence policy, hybrid threats are understood as coordinated and deliberate campaigns by state and non-state actors that combine military and non-military tools to exploit vulnerabilities in political, economic, societal, and technological systems. These campaigns include malicious cyber operations, foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), disinformation campaigns, covert political influence, economic coercion, the instrumentalisation of migration, and threats against critical infrastructure. Crucially, hybrid threats are designed to operate below conventional warfare thresholds, rendering them difficult to attribute and to counter effectively through traditional security mechanisms (Council of the European Union, 2026; NATO definition of hybrid threats).

In response to these challenges, the EU has progressively developed a structured policy architecture aimed at enhancing collective resilience and implementing coordinated responses. Central to this architecture is the *EU Hybrid Toolbox*, a comprehensive strategic framework that integrates preventive, cooperative, stability-building, restrictive, and supportive measures. The Toolbox is designed to facilitate cross-sectoral coordination both within the EU institutional framework and between member states and external partners. The Hybrid Toolbox is complemented by the EU *cyber diplomacy toolbox* and other institutional mechanisms that reinforce the Union's capacity to deter, prevent, and respond to hybrid campaigns. Moreover, the establishment of Hybrid Rapid Response Teams exemplifies the EU's evolving operational capacity to deploy multidisciplinary expertise in contexts where targeted support is required (Council of the European Union, 2024).

An important dimension of the EU's hybrid threat policy has been the safeguarding of democratic processes and public information environments. Electoral integrity and robust information ecosystems are recognised as primary targets of hybrid campaigns. To address this, EU institutions and member states have pursued legislative measures and operational activities aimed at countering FIMI, strengthening media literacy, and developing rapid alert systems. Legislative instruments, such as the NIS2 Directive and resilience-related regulations affecting critical infrastructure protection, extend cybersecurity and resilience obligations across multiple sectors, thereby addressing both technical and societal vulnerabilities that hybrid actors seek to exploit (Council of the European Union, 2026).

The EU's commitment to confronting hybrid threats is further reinforced by sustained international cooperation. In particular, cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) enhances shared situational awareness, joint preparedness exercises, and coordinated strategic communications. Such multilateral cooperation recognises that hybrid threats frequently transcend national boundaries and require integrated, multi-level responses involving security, defence, and civil society stakeholders.

The 16 March 2026 Council Conclusions: Reinforcing Strategic Direction

The Council of the European Union's *Conclusions on advancing the European Union's capacity to counter hybrid threats*, adopted on 16 March 2026, represent a significant policy reaffirmation and elaboration of the Union's strategic approach.1 The document begins by *condemning persistent hybrid activities* by both state and non-state actors that undermine the security and stability of the EU, its member states, and partner countries. These activities are characterised in the conclusions as coordinated campaigns that include sabotage of critical infrastructure, malicious cyber activities, FIMI, election interference, and the instrumentalisation of migration. The conclusions explicitly single out the Russian Federation and its proxies for their sustained hybrid campaigns and articulate the Union's determination to counter these through a strategic framework of preventative and responsive measures (Consilium.europa.eu press release; Council conclusions XX / 16 Mar 2026).

A central element of the 2026 conclusions is *the reaffirmation of the EU's commitment* to employ all available tools within the EU Hybrid Toolbox, as well as related instruments such as the cyber diplomacy toolbox, to prevent, deter, and respond to hybrid campaigns, irrespective of their origin, scale, or intensity. The document underscores the importance of coherent policy alignment across diverse security initiatives, calling for sustained involvement of coordinating structures such as the *Horizontal Working Party on Enhancing Resilience and Countering Hybrid Threats*. It also explicitly emphasises the need to bolster analytical and situational awareness capabilities through further strengthening of the *Single Intelligence Analysis Capacity* (SIAC) and its Hybrid Fusion Cell, reinforcing the analytical foundations upon which strategic responses can be built.

Importantly, the conclusions link the protection of democratic institutions to efforts to counter hybrid threats. They stress that the integrity and resilience of electoral processes are fundamental to the democratic foundations of the Union and are identified as particularly vulnerable to hybrid campaigns, including FIMI. With anticipated elections in both EU member states and partner countries, the document highlights the urgency of coordinated vigilance and preparedness to safeguard democratic integrity. Implementation of cybersecurity and resilience directives, including NIS2 and the Critical Entities Resilience (CER) Directive, is explicitly called for, reflecting an integrated approach that combines legislative action with operational resilience measures.

The 2026 conclusions also extend the EU's strategic compass by addressing the threat posed by *emerging and critical technologies*, such as artificial intelligence and quantum technologies. The text acknowledges that while these technologies may be harnessed by malign actors to facilitate hybrid campaigns, they simultaneously offer opportunities for early detection, analysis, and response. The Council therefore underscores the necessity of advancing technological capacities that enhance the Union's resilience and analytical foresight. Additionally, the conclusions contemplate future enhancements to restrictive measures and call for intensified collaboration among member states, EU institutions, the private sector, academia, and civil society, emphasising a whole-of-society approach to hybrid threat preparedness.

Table

Policy Dimension	EU Level Role	Member State Role	Interaction / Complementarity
Legislative Action	Develops EU-wide directives and regulations (e.g., NIS2, CER	Implements EU legislation nationally, adapts	EU sets harmonized norms; MS ensure operationalisation

	Directive), sanctions frameworks, and the EU Hybrid Toolbox.	domestic laws to meet EU standards, enforces compliance.	and legal enforcement locally.
Analytical Enhancement	Coordinates intelligence-sharing and situational awareness via SIAC and Hybrid Fusion Cell; monitors cross-border hybrid campaigns; develops risk assessments.	Provides national intelligence inputs, monitors domestic threats, contributes to EU-wide threat databases.	Data flow is bidirectional: MS provide granular intelligence, EU synthesizes for strategic guidance.
Multilateral Cooperation	Coordinates EU-NATO collaboration, international partnerships, and cross-border crisis response; organizes joint exercises.	Participates in regional and bilateral initiatives; liaises with EU partners for joint operations.	EU facilitates collective action; MS operationalize missions and provide personnel/logistical support.
Societal Resilience	Designs EU-level strategies for democracy protection, countering disinformation, and fostering public awareness campaigns.	Implements national programs for media literacy, election integrity, public communication, and critical infrastructure protection.	Policies converge to reinforce resilience from top-down and bottom-up approaches; societal readiness is strengthened via shared frameworks.
Technological Adaptation	Promotes adoption of secure emerging technologies, research on threat detection tools, cross-border cybersecurity standards.	Integrates technology into national critical infrastructure, monitors threats locally, supports EU-level tech initiatives.	EU drives technological strategy; MS operationalize tools and ensure sector-specific adoption and adaptation.
Critical Infrastructure Resilience	Sets EU-level standards, conducts cross-border risk analysis, and issues resilience guidelines.	Strengthens national infrastructure, ensures compliance with EU standards, implements protective measures.	EU provides harmonized resilience benchmarks; MS tailor protective measures to national infrastructure vulnerabilities.

Analysis

This table illustrates how **multi-layered EU policy architecture** operates through a continuous **feedback loop** between the EU and its Member States. Each dimension involves complementary roles:

- **Legislative Action:** The EU harmonizes norms, MS enforce domestically.
- **Analytical Enhancement:** Intelligence and threat data circulate between EU central bodies and national agencies, creating a comprehensive picture of hybrid threats.
- **Multilateral Cooperation:** The EU facilitates partnerships, while MS provide operational capacity.
- **Societal Resilience:** Democracy protection and public awareness campaigns rely on alignment between EU strategies and national implementation.
- **Technological Adaptation & Critical Infrastructure:** Both levels act in tandem to modernize systems, detect threats, and ensure resilient operations.

By situating hybrid threats at the intersection of democracy protection, critical infrastructure resilience, and technological adaptation, this architecture ensures policy coherence, adaptability, and operational effectiveness across the EU and its Member States.

Indeed, the EU is an open, complex and flexible political system.

Critical Assessment and Conclusion

The EU's hybrid threat policy framework, as articulated in the 2026 conclusions, demonstrates several strengths. The strategic reaffirmation reflects a *mature and holistic understanding* of hybrid challenges, integrating normative, operational, and analytical dimensions. By explicitly embedding the protection of democratic processes and critical infrastructure within the hybrid threat agenda, the Council's conclusions articulate a policy that transcends purely technical responses to encompass broader socio-political resilience. The enhancement of coordinated analysis through SIAC and the Hybrid Fusion Cell represents a notable investment in intelligence integration and strategic foresight, addressing a longstanding challenge in hybrid threat governance.

However, significant challenges persist. The inherently ambiguous nature of hybrid threats complicates attribution and response, potentially limiting the timeliness and precision of counteractions. Coordination across multiple institutional, national, and sectoral actors requires significant resources and political coherence, especially given the diversity of member states' legal competences and threat perceptions. Further, while the 2026 conclusions signal an ambition to deepen restrictive measures and strategic capabilities, translating these strategic aspirations into operational coherence and measurable outcomes remains an ongoing task.

In sum, the Council's 16 March 2026 conclusions reaffirm the EU's determined commitment to confronting hybrid threats through a comprehensive, multi-layered policy architecture that combines legislative action, analytical enhancement, multilateral cooperation, and societal resilience. By situating hybrid threats at the intersection of democracy protection, critical infrastructure resilience, and technological adaptation, the EU underscores the centrality of hybrid threat preparedness within its broader peace and security agenda. This represents a substantive advancement in the Union's strategic posture, albeit one that will require sustained effort and political will to implement effectively.

This built in expectations for a strengthening of governance of the CSDP, but we would also recommend Europol to establish a department for grey zone crime.

26.EU Engagement with Russia Across Subregional Frameworks

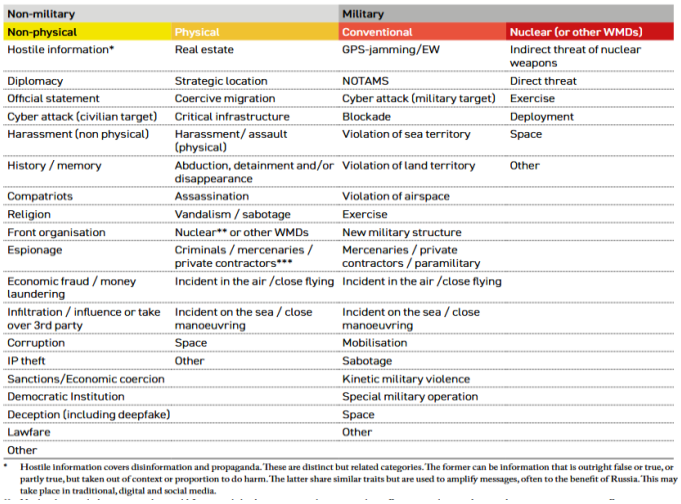
If an agreement on Ukraine secured, the rivalry between the Eu and Russia is expected to continue as low intensity warfare, at which point the Eu must be ready to engage and counter Russia. So much more in the absence of adequate defenses Putin will perceive it as invitation for further attacks making the UK-F led reassurance force into a holding operaton freeing up Russian forces to further expansion.

Hybrid warfare can be defined as a spectrum of hostile activities that combine military and non-military instruments to achieve strategic objectives while staying below the threshold of open armed conflict. These activities are designed to undermine a target state or institution through the coordinated use of cyber operations, information manipulation, economic pressure, covert actions, and other measures that exploit vulnerabilities in democratic, technological, and social systems. They often involve deliberate ambiguity, deniability, and an interplay between overt and covert means, blurring the lines between peace and war while seeking to avoid classical collective defence triggers. Hybrid warfare sits at the *escalated end* of hybrid threat activity, involving not just sub-threshold interference but also the potential integration of conventional military force and even chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) elements as part of coercive campaigns.

The European Union and its partners recognise the need for dedicated institutional focus on this challenge. An important initiative in this regard is the **European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats**, based in

Helsinki, Finland[12]. Established in 2017 as an international, network-based hub for expertise, training, and strategic analysis, the Centre brings together EU and NATO participating states to share best practices, conduct exercises, and strengthen capabilities to prevent and counter hybrid threats. Although not an EU body per se, it plays a key role in developing doctrine and operational concepts that support EU and NATO resilience against hybrid campaigns.

Figure Hybrid Threats



Non-military		Military	
Non-physical	Physical	Conventional	Nuclear (or other WMDs)
Hostile information*	Real estate	GPS-jamming/EW	Indirect threat of nuclear weapons
Diplomacy	Strategic location	NOTAMS	Direct threat
Official statement	Coercive migration	Cyber attack (military target)	Exercise
Cyber attack (civilian target)	Critical infrastructure	Blockade	Deployment
Harassment (non physical)	Harassment/ assault (physical)	Violation of sea territory	Space
History / memory	Abduction, detainment and/or disappearance	Violation of land territory	Other
Compatriots	Assassination	Violation of airspace	
Religion	Vandalism / sabotage	Exercise	
Front organisation	Nuclear** or other WMDs	New military structure	
Espionage	Criminals / mercenaries / private contractors***	Mercenaries / private contractors / paramilitary	
Economic fraud / money laundering	Incident in the air /close flying	Incident in the air /close flying	
Infiltration / influence or take over 3rd party	Incident on the sea / close manoeuvring	Incident on the sea / close manoeuvring	
Corruption	Space	Mobilisation	
IP theft	Other	Sabotage	
Sanctions/Economic coercion		Kinetic military violence	
Democratic Institution		Special military operation	
Deception (including deepfake)		Space	
Lawfare		Other	
Other			

* Hostile information covers disinformation and propaganda. These are distinct but related categories. The former can be information that is outright false or true, or partly true, but taken out of context or proportion to do harm. The latter share similar traits but are used to amplify messages, often to the benefit of Russia. This may take place in traditional, digital and social media.

Source: https://frivarld.se/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Hybrid-Tracker-SFWF.pdf

The EU currently addresses hybrid threats—tactics that combine conventional and unconventional measures such as cyberattacks, disinformation, economic coercion, espionage, influence operations, and proxy actions—with a multidimensional approach that targets societal cohesion, democratic institutions, and critical infrastructure. Its policy and strategy frameworks, including the EU Global Strategy of 2016 and the EU Hybrid Threats Strategy of the same year, emphasize resilience, prevention, and coordination. The Joint Communication on Countering Hybrid Threats, updated in 2022, integrates actions across sectors such as cyber, energy, finance, and information. Coordination and intelligence sharing are managed through the Hybrid Fusion Cell within the European External Action Service, which monitors, analyzes, and coordinates hybrid threat responses. Cooperation with EU agencies, including Europol for law enforcement, ENISA for cybersecurity, and the European Defence Agency, ensures cross-domain coverage. The EU strengthens cybersecurity and critical infrastructure through the implementation of the NIS2 Directive, which enhances member states' cybersecurity and incident reporting, while stress tests and simulations help identify vulnerabilities in energy grids, transport networks, and communication systems. Strategic communication and counter-disinformation efforts are carried out through EUvsDisinfo and StratCom East/South teams, complemented by media literacy campaigns to improve societal resilience. Cooperation with allies, particularly NATO and G7 partners, addresses hybrid threats that cross borders, including maritime security, financial sanctions, and intelligence sharing. Crisis preparedness includes exercises like Cyber Europe, which simulate hybrid scenarios, and the integration of national crisis management plans with EU-level coordination.

Despite these measures, challenges remain. Implementation is uneven across member states due to differences in capacity and political will. Civil-military integration is limited, as hybrid threats blur the line between civilian and military domains. Dependence on private sector operators for critical infrastructure complicates enforcement, while rapid technological advances such as AI-driven disinformation, deepfakes, and autonomous cyberattacks outpace current detection and response mechanisms. The EU's largely defensive posture also limits proactive responses compared to other global actors.

Strengthening the EU's approach requires enhanced intelligence and early warning, integrating all-source intelligence from EU bodies, member states, and private partners into a centralized Hybrid Threat Intelligence Platform and utilizing AI analytics for real-time detection across cyber, financial, and informational domains. Deepening civil-military coordination through dedicated

[12] https://www.hybridcoe.fi/

planning cells and rapid deployment teams would enable faster, integrated responses. Cybersecurity and critical infrastructure resilience can be further strengthened through accelerated NIS2 compliance, EU-wide cybersecurity standards for key sectors, and mandatory resilience audits for private operators. Strategic communication and societal resilience should be scaled up with comprehensive media literacy programs and proactive countermeasures against foreign influence campaigns, leveraging AI-assisted monitoring. Legal and policy innovation could include EU-wide frameworks addressing hybrid coercion and expanded sanctions for non-kinetic aggression targeting society or governance. Enhanced coordination with NATO and third parties through joint exercises and intelligence sharing, particularly in strategic regions, would improve preparedness, while simulation and red-teaming exercises at the EU level would test vulnerabilities in decision-making and crisis response.

Overall, the EU has made significant progress in defense, resilience, and coordination, but it remains reactive, fragmented, and dependent on member-state capacities. Greater emphasis on early warning, societal resilience, civil-military integration, and proactive measures using advanced technologies and strategic communication would substantially enhance its hybrid threat posture.

The sub-regionals are interfaces with Russia and complements hardened security posture

Four of Europe's Sub-regionals have Russia as a member: BSEC, Baltic Sea Coincil, the Euro-Arctic Barents Council and the Arctic Council with whom representation and dialogue remain possible at ministerial only in one of them: The BSEC.

In the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), the EU can maintain engagement through multilateral dialogues that promote conflict prevention, regional security, and economic cooperation. Participation in BSEC Working Groups, coordinated through the EEAS, allows the EU to embed its values—such as rule of law, transparency, and environmental standards—into regional initiatives. Operationally, the EU could support joint projects in energy security, transport connectivity, and environmental protection where Russian participation is constructive and consistent with agreed standards. Engagement in BSEC should remain selective, focusing on confidence-building measures rather than strategic integration in areas where Russian actions could undermine CFSP objectives.

In the Barents Euro-Arctic region, EU engagement with Russia can be conducted at the subregional governance level, emphasizing practical, depoliticized cooperation. This includes environmental monitoring, climate adaptation programs, and cross-border initiatives with indigenous communities. Project-level partnerships, funded and technically supported by the EU through joint regional institutions, allow engagement while ensuring that activities align with CFSP objectives and avoid strategic or military leverage by Russia.

Engagement in this region should focus on mutual benefits and shared regional challenges rather than political alignment.

In the Baltic Sea region, engagement must balance regional security concerns with multilateral cooperation. At the institutional level, the EU can participate in CBSS working groups where Russia is a member, promoting regional resilience, maritime safety, environmental protection, and socio-economic cooperation. Operationally, EU projects could focus on climate adaptation, pollution mitigation, or cross-border infrastructure, ensuring that Russian participation contributes to constructive outcomes without compromising EU security priorities. Normative engagement should reinforce EU rules-based standards, using conditional participation and compliance frameworks to secure alignment with EU values.

The Arctic Council represents a unique forum in which Russia is a full member and geopolitical tensions are pronounced. EU engagement should focus on scientific, environmental, and technical cooperation rather than security or military matters. Participation as an observer or through collaborative initiatives on climate science, environmental protection, and sustainable development enables the EU to work with Arctic indigenous communities and regional stakeholders. Normative engagement remains critical, ensuring that joint initiatives promote transparency, environmental accountability, and human rights, while strategically insulating EU activities from Russian geopolitical maneuvers.

Across all subregions, EU engagement with Russia should be differentiated based on the strategic, operational, and normative context. The EU must distinguish between areas of shared interest, such as environmental cooperation, infrastructure, and scientific research, and areas sensitive to CFSP concerns, including security, military, and strategic energy leverage. Engagement should operate simultaneously at the institutional level through policy dialogues and governance participation, at the operational level through joint projects, and at the normative level by embedding EU rules, human rights, environmental standards, and governance norms into all activities. Cooperation should be guided by strategic caution, ensuring that joint projects do not undermine CFSP objectives or inadvertently empower coercive Russian influence. Monitoring, conditional participation, and clearly defined performance indicators should guide all interactions. Coordination with member states and NATO is essential to ensure that subregional engagement with Russia is consistent with broader EU foreign policy, security, and multilateral commitments.

In summary, the EU can engage effectively with Russia in subregional frameworks by tailoring its approach to the strategic context, operational level, and normative

priorities of each subregion. Engagement should be pragmatic, technical, and project-based wherever possible, embedded within multilateral institutions, and carefully calibrated to safeguard EU security interests while reinforcing CFSP objectives and values.

Here's a **concise cross-subregion table** summarizing the EU's engagement with Russia, showing strategy, level, focus, risks, and CFSP alignment. This complements the narrative and is suitable for a policy brief:

Table EU Engagement with Russia: Subregional Overview

Subregion / Forum	Level of EU Engagement	Focus Areas	Strategic Risks	CFSP Alignment
Black Sea / BSEC	Institutional (Working Groups), Operational (joint projects)	Conflict prevention, regional security, energy connectivity, environmental protection	Over-integration in areas of Russian strategic leverage; erosion of EU influence if norms not enforced	Supports stability, governance, and normative promotion without compromising security objectives
Barents / Euro-Arctic	Subregional governance, Project-based	Climate adaptation, environmental monitoring, indigenous cooperation	Risk of inadvertent strategic advantage for Russia; limited leverage in governance disputes	Reinforces practical resilience, environmental protection, and normative adherence
Baltic Sea / CBSS	Institutional (policy dialogues), Operational (projects)	Maritime safety, pollution mitigation, socio-economic cooperation	Security sensitivity, particularly regarding maritime and hybrid threats	Promotes regional resilience, governance, and EU rules-based standards
Arctic Council	Scientific and technical cooperation, Observer participation	Climate science, environmental protection, sustainable development	Geopolitical tensions; limited influence on security or military matters	Supports normative objectives, environmental stewardship, and sustainable development while maintaining strategic insulation
Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)	Policy dialogue, sectoral cooperation	Energy transition, economic integration, political stability	Risk of policy fragmentation and uneven adherence to EU norms	Aligns with CFSP objectives by promoting governance, economic resilience, and political dialogue

This table clearly shows **where the EU can act, what to prioritize, what to monitor carefully, and how each engagement aligns with CFSP goals**, making it actionable for strategic planning.

This comparative overview highlights that EU engagement with Russia must be carefully calibrated, combining strategic caution with operational pragmatism. Across all subregions, the EU should prioritize areas of **shared**

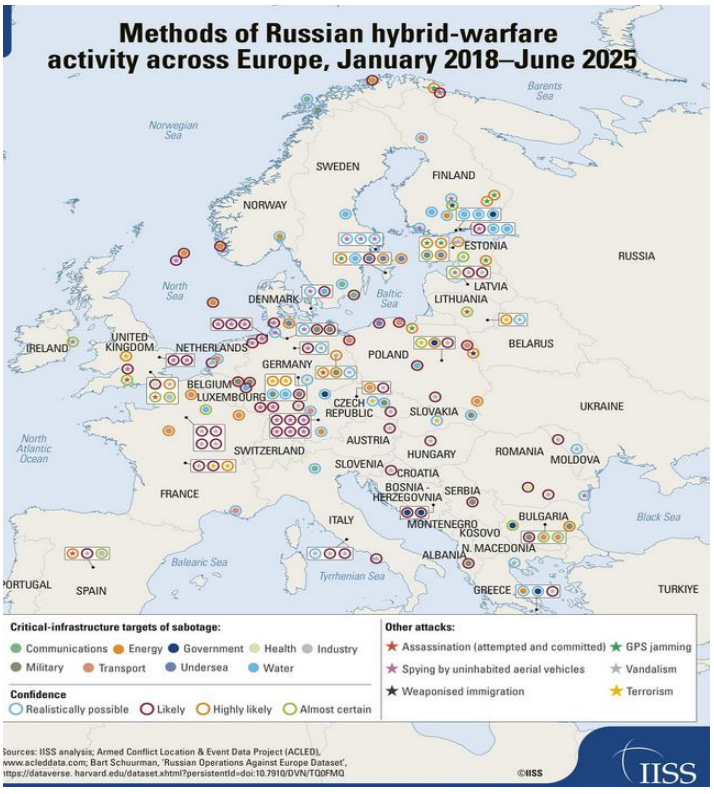
interest, such as environmental protection, climate adaptation, and infrastructure connectivity, while avoiding overexposure in domains where Russian actions may undermine CFSP objectives. Engagement must operate simultaneously at the **institutional, operational, and normative levels**, ensuring policy coherence, local ownership, and measurable impact.

Purposeful activities should be designed with **clearly defined outputs and outcomes**, allowing the EU to monitor progress against strategic objectives and CFSP-aligned KPIs. Conditional participation and compliance frameworks can reinforce adherence to EU norms, while project-level cooperation provides tangible benefits on the ground. By embedding lessons learned from one subregion into broader policy design, the EU can create a **continuous feedback loop**, enhancing strategic consistency across BSEC, CBSS, Barents/Euro-Arctic, Arctic Council, and UfM initiatives.

The proposed **EEAS subregional office** would play a central role in harmonizing these efforts, consolidating institutional knowledge, overseeing project implementation, and coordinating evaluation mechanisms. Through such a structure, the EU can ensure that engagement with Russia is **strategically coherent, normatively robust, and operationally effective**, supporting regional stability, resilience, and adherence to EU values while mitigating risks.

We also recommend that the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) be merged for reasons of **strategic coherence, operational efficiency, and policy impact**. Currently, the two frameworks operate with overlapping objectives but separate institutional structures, funding mechanisms, and reporting processes, which can create duplication, inconsistent engagement, and fragmented messaging to partner countries. Merging them would allow the EU to **harmonize political guidelines, financial instruments, and operational priorities**, ensuring that interventions across the Eastern neighbourhood are aligned with CFSP objectives and EU norms.

Figure



Source: Edwards & Seidenstein (2025)

A unified framework would also enhance **institutional coordination**, enabling the EEAS and Commission services to plan multi-year, purpose-driven initiatives without the constraints of parallel reporting cycles. It would facilitate **cross-regional learning**, allowing best practices in governance, rule of law, and socio-economic development to be shared between partner states, while strengthening the EU's visibility and credibility as a coherent actor. From a financial perspective, consolidation would streamline funding allocation, reduce administrative complexity, and maximize the impact of EU instruments such as ENI, IPA, and sectoral investment programs.

Finally, merging the ENP and EaP would reinforce the EU's **strategic leverage vis-à-vis external actors**, including Russia, by presenting a coherent, consistent, and politically credible approach to the Eastern neighbourhood. It would allow the EU to combine normative influence, security objectives, and development priorities in a way that produces tangible results on the ground, strengthens local ownership, and advances CFSP-aligned objectives across the region.

In principle, DG MENA also belongs in this construction on the assumption DG INTPA is merged into the EEAS as the CSDP directorate is demerged from the EEAS and into DG DEFENCE proper. To work the external relations group would have to be strengthened considerably and the CFSP move beyond sui generis competence to more of an shared competence and the diplomatic service be further strengthened in manpower combined with downsizing in the member states, once the push ups on OECD guidelines on budgetary discipline are done with. Merging DG Elargement, ENP & DG MENA back into the EEAS is also an attractive proposition, and constitute a viable alternative and fall back for our leadership to ponder.

In the future, we recommend that the EU-Russian relationship be equipped with a comprehensive set of crisis management tools. These should include a dedicated hotline to ensure direct and immediate communication during emergencies, a joint monitoring mechanism for rapid verification of incidents, coordinated contingency planning to address potential escalations, a shared framework for risk assessment and early warning, a system for regular simulation exercises to test and improve responsiveness, clearly defined channels for diplomatic de-escalation, and a structured protocol for the transparent exchange of information to prevent misunderstandings.

Operational scenarios

The mixing of soft and hard instruments will therefore have to be operationalised through **clear accountability mechanisms**, centred on the demonstrable **reduction of Russian hybrid attacks** against the EU and its partners. For the period **2022–2025**, Russian hybrid activity may be **numbered and tracked in the following manner**:

a) Cyber operations and digital intrusion, including state-sponsored or state-enabled cyberattacks against government networks, critical infrastructure, electoral systems, and defence-related industries, as well as persistent probing and pre-positioning activity below the threshold of overt disruption.

b) Information manipulation and interference, encompassing disinformation campaigns, coordinated inauthentic behaviour, narrative laundering through third-party actors, and influence operations targeting public opinion, elections, Ukraine-related solidarity, sanctions regimes, and trust in EU and NATO institutions.

c) Sabotage and kinetic hybrid acts, including attacks or attempted attacks against energy infrastructure, undersea cables, pipelines, railways, military logistics nodes, and industrial facilities, whether conducted directly or via proxies and deniable actors.

d) Weaponisation of migration and humanitarian pressure, involving the deliberate facilitation or steering of irregular migration flows to destabilise EU border states and strain internal cohesion.

e) Economic coercion and grey-zone pressure, such as selective trade disruptions, energy leverage, illicit finance operations, sanctions evasion networks, and the instrumentalisation of strategic dependencies.

f) Political subversion and elite capture, including covert funding, corruption networks, intimidation, and the cultivation of sympathetic political, business, or media figures within EU member states and candidate countries.

Table - **KPI and Indicator Framework for Russian Hybrid Activity (2022–2025)**

Hybrid Category	Observed Trend	EU Instruments & Means	KPIs / Indicators	Target Indicators
a) Cyber operations and digital intrusion	Persistent high-volume activity; emphasis on pre-positioning, supply-chain compromise, and long-dwell access rather than overt disruption	NIS2, EU Cyber Diplomacy Toolbox, Joint Cyber Unit, cyber sanctions, capacity-building for MS and partners	• Successful intrusions into priority networks	

• Mean time to detect (MTTD)				
• Mean time to recover (MTTR)				
• Attribution confidence score	• ≥30% reduction in successful intrusions			
• MTTD < 72 hrs				
• MTTR < 7 days				
• Public attribution in ≥50% of major incidents				
b) Information manipulation and interference	Sustained, adaptive, AI-enabled campaigns; increasing use of proxies and third-country amplification	EEAS StratCom Task Forces, DSA enforcement, platform coordination, sanctions, public exposure measures	• Reach and engagement of hostile narratives	
• Speed of takedown				
• Election interference alerts				
• Public trust indices	• ≥40% reduction in reach of core hostile narratives			
• Platform action < 48 hrs				
• No material election outcome distortion				
c) Sabotage and kinetic hybrid acts	Low frequency, high-impact attempts; focus on energy, transport, and undersea infrastructure	Critical Infrastructure Resilience Directive, maritime surveillance, intelligence fusion, sanctions	• Number of attacks / attempts	
• Disruption duration				
• Recovery time				
• Attribution rate	• Zero successful high-impact attacks			
• Recovery < 72 hrs				

• Attribution in ≥70% of cases				
d) Weaponisation of migration and humanitarian pressure	Episodic spikes aligned with geopolitical pressure; instrumental use of third-country routes	Integrated Border Management, Frontex, third-country engagement, restrictive measures	• Artificially induced flow spikes	
• Duration of pressure episodes				
• Political destabilisation indicators	• No sustained artificial migration crises			
• Pressure neutralised < 30 days				
e) Economic coercion and grey-zone pressure	Persistent sanctions evasion; rerouting through third states and shadow logistics	Sanctions Enforcement Task Force, customs cooperation, AML/FIU coordination	• Detected evasion networks	
• Value of blocked transactions				
• Time from detection to designation	• ≥50% disruption of identified evasion networks			
• Designation < 90 days				
f) Political subversion and elite capture	Long-term, low-visibility efforts targeting financing, media, and strategic elites	Transparency rules, foreign funding bans, counter-intelligence cooperation, sanctions	• Detected illicit funding cases	
• Investigations launched				
• Sanctions or convictions	• Rising detection and exposure rate			
• Declining successful influence cases over time				

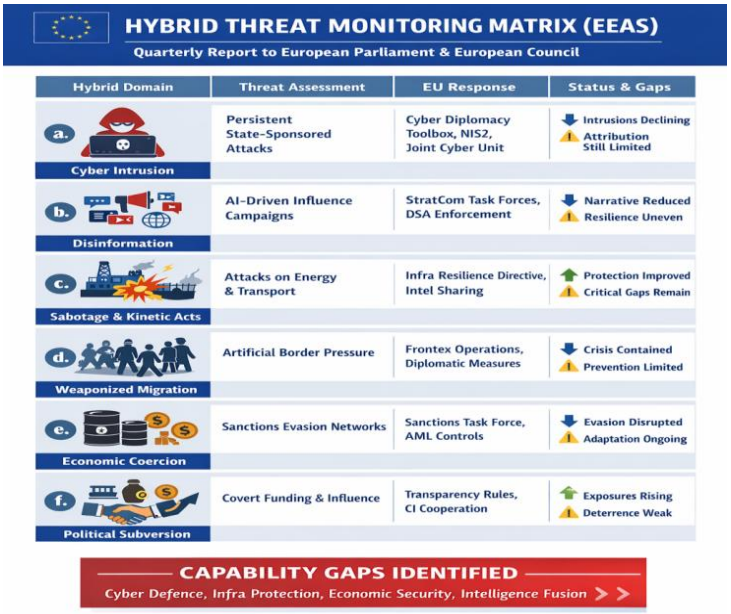
Operational Accountability Logic

Success should not be measured by the total elimination of hybrid activity, but rather by demonstrable reductions in both frequency and impact across all six domains of threat. It requires the accelerated detection, accurate attribution, and rapid recovery from incidents, ensuring that disruptions are contained and responses are timely. Equally critical is the imposition of increasing political, economic, and operational costs on the perpetrators, signaling that hybrid operations carry tangible consequences. Success is further indicated by observable deterrence effects, reflected in trend reversals over successive reporting periods, showing that the EU's integrated civilian and military instruments are reshaping adversary behaviour and reinforcing strategic resilience.

Uses of a Threat Monitoring Matrix

A Threat Monitoring Matrix serves as a central tool for **systematic assessment, tracking, and management of hybrid threats**. It provides a structured framework to capture both the evolving threat landscape and the EU's corresponding instruments and capabilities. By clearly mapping threats, response mechanisms, key indicators, and capability gaps, the matrix allows policymakers, security agencies, and political leadership to **prioritise resources, guide operational planning, and coordinate actions across multiple domains**. It facilitates **accountability by linking observable trends and KPIs to concrete measures**, enabling the European Parliament, European Council, and other oversight bodies to evaluate effectiveness over time.

Figure



The matrix also supports **early warning and trend analysis**, helping to detect emerging patterns of adversary behaviour, anticipate escalation, and inform strategic decision-making. Beyond assessment, it serves as a **communication and coordination tool**, aligning Member States, EU institutions, and partner agencies around shared situational awareness, agreed priorities, and timely responses. Ultimately, the Threat Monitoring Matrix is not merely a record of threats, but an **integrated management instrument** that enables the EU to enhance resilience, impose costs on adversaries, and achieve measurable deterrence against hybrid operations.

EU hybrid resilience will see measurable improvement; however, in several domains, threat adaptation continues to outpace institutional responses. No single domain demonstrates uniformly decisive deterrence across all Member States, highlighting persistent gaps in coordinated capability and strategic alignment.

Capability Gaps vs. Current and Future Threat Environment

The EU's ability to respond effectively to hybrid threats is constrained by a series of structural and domain-specific gaps that must be addressed to align with both current and projected threat environments. At a cross-cutting level, intelligence fusion between civilian, military, and internal security actors remains fragmented, hindering rapid situational awareness and coordinated response. Political decision cycles are often slow relative to the speed and adaptability of hybrid escalation, limiting the EU's capacity

to impose timely deterrence. Member State resilience is uneven, creating exploitable asymmetries that adversaries can leverage. Furthermore, enforcement mechanisms at the EU level—including sanctions, transparency measures, and counter-influence instruments—remain limited in scope and authority, reducing overall strategic leverage.

Domain-specific capability gaps further exacerbate these vulnerabilities. In the cyber domain, EU-level active cyber defence and hunt-forward capabilities are insufficient, and attribution and public signalling thresholds are inconsistently applied, weakening deterrence. Within the information space, the EU lacks real-time narrative disruption tools and relies excessively on voluntary platform compliance, leaving strategic narratives exposed to manipulation. Critical infrastructure protection suffers from gaps in undersea, space, and cross-border surveillance, alongside limited redundancy and rapid repair capacity, increasing vulnerability to both kinetic and hybrid attacks. Regarding migration instrumentalisation, upstream prevention tools in third countries are weak, and coercive leverage remains limited outside of sanctions, reducing the EU's ability to prevent artificially induced flows. Economic security is challenged by incomplete mapping of strategic dependencies and shadow logistics networks, coupled with slow adaptation of sanctions to evolving evasion techniques. Political subversion continues to exploit insufficient financial transparency enforcement, while penalties for illicit influence remain weak relative to the benefits accrued by malign actors.

To address these gaps, the implementation of the Strategic Compass must be accelerated, with hybrid deterrence treated as a core security function integrated across civilian and military planning. A permanent EEAS hybrid monitoring and attribution cell is required, with clear authority to trigger graduated response options based on observed trends. Capability development led by the EDA and coordinated with the Commission must be closely aligned with hybrid defence requirements, including investment in dual-use assets, rapid repair infrastructure, and digital resilience. Parliamentary oversight should prioritise outcome-based evaluation rather than activity counts, leveraging the previously established KPIs to measure tangible reductions in threat impact and to hold EU institutions accountable for both resilience and deterrence.

Ten Questions for the Professor on the Failed Power Transition in Europe (EU vs. Russia)

1. How does the concept of a "failed power transition" help explain the deterioration of relations between Russia and Europe since the early 2000s, and what structural factors made a peaceful transition unlikely?
2. To what extent did the post-Cold War European security architecture — particularly NATO and EU enlargement — contribute to Russia's perception of status loss, and how did this shape Moscow's revisionist behaviour?
3. How do theories of status anxiety and great-power identity inform our understanding of Russia's refusal to accept a subordinate or equal-partner role within a European-led order?
4. In what ways did the EU's normative power project clash with Russia's vision of a multipolar Europe, and how did this normative–geopolitical tension contribute to the failed transition?
5. How should we interpret Russia's actions in Ukraine, Georgia, and the wider near abroad: as symptoms of a failed power transition, or as deliberate strategies to renegotiate the regional order?
6. What role did domestic political developments in Russia — such as authoritarian consolidation, elite interests, and regime survival logics — play in shaping its confrontational stance toward Europe?
7. Could alternative institutional arrangements or security guarantees in the 1990s and early 2000s have prevented the breakdown of the European–Russian relationship, or was conflict structurally embedded?
8. How do geoeconomic factors, particularly energy interdependence and pipeline politics, intersect with geopolitical drivers in explaining the collapse of cooperative frameworks between Russia and Europe?
9. In your view, does the failed power transition represent a temporary disruption or a long-term structural rupture in the European security order, and what indicators should we watch to assess future trajectories?
10. How might regional security complex theory help us understand why the failed power transition manifested so intensely in the post-Soviet space, and why the near abroad became the primary arena of contestation?

27. Engaging Visegrad4, Central European Initiative and GCC

The Visegrád Four (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) faces strategic challenges rooted in differing national priorities, political trajectories, and external alignments. While the group shares historical and geographic commonalities, divergences exist in approaches to EU integration, migration policy, energy dependency, and relations with Russia. These differences create friction in projecting a unified external policy, limiting the coherence of regional EU strategies. Domestic political shifts in member states may also undermine collective decision-making or compliance with EU norms, presenting challenges for the EEAS in aligning V4 actions with broader CFSP objectives.

The Central European Initiative (CEI), which encompasses a broader set of Central and South-Eastern European states, faces challenges of institutional heterogeneity, uneven economic development, and varying capacities for governance and public administration reform. Member states' strategic priorities often differ, particularly regarding EU accession policies, security cooperation, and regional infrastructure investment. Coordination is further complicated by overlapping mandates with other regional

frameworks, requiring careful EEAS engagement to prevent duplication or fragmentation of EU interventions.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) operates in a complex geopolitical environment characterized by intra-GCC rivalries, regional security tensions, and differing foreign policy orientations among member states. These strategic divergences hinder unified regional positions on energy policy, trade, and security cooperation. External pressures, including competition with global powers and fluctuating oil markets, compound internal coordination challenges and require adaptive EU engagement.

The EEAS engages with these organizations to provide political guidance, coordinate EU-funded initiatives, and ensure that member-state actions are aligned with EU strategic objectives. Engagement is tailored to the organizational structure and capacities of each group. In the V4, the EEAS supports alignment of national positions with CFSP objectives through dialogue facilitation, joint statements, and coordinated regional projects, focusing on security, energy, and rule-of-law initiatives. In the CEI, the EEAS prioritizes capacity-building, governance reforms, and infrastructure or development projects to enhance institutional coherence and regional integration. With the GCC, the EEAS leverages diplomatic channels, economic cooperation programs, and strategic dialogues to promote regional stability, energy security, and alignment with EU standards on human rights and governance.

Through systematic engagement with these groups, the EEAS strengthens governance by supporting institutional capacity-building and standard-setting in public administration, legal frameworks, and security institutions. It ensures seamless policy integration by aligning regional initiatives with EU-wide CFSP priorities, preventing fragmentation and maintaining consistent application of EU norms across multiple platforms. Managerial harmonization is facilitated by promoting best practices, shared procedures, and coordinated project management across member states, which reduces duplication and inefficiency. Standardization is advanced by embedding EU benchmarks and quality standards in governance, security, economic, and humanitarian initiatives, creating predictable, measurable, and replicable outcomes. Joint V4 energy or security projects benefit from harmonized procurement standards, legal compliance, and reporting metrics aligned with EU frameworks, CEI infrastructure programs can adopt EU project management methodologies, and GCC energy cooperation can incorporate EU environmental and transparency standards.

Engagement with these regional organizations allows the EU to project influence, reinforce norms, and advance CFSP objectives without direct intervention. By integrating financial instruments, technical assistance, and political dialogue, the EEAS can mitigate divergences among member states, ensuring collective action and coherence. Establishing common KPIs, reporting standards, and monitoring mechanisms fosters accountability and measurable impact, reinforcing both regional stability and EU credibility.

Building on the previous analysis, the strategic engagement with the V4, CEI, and GCC demonstrates the importance of balancing regional autonomy with EU-wide coherence. Effective coordination requires continuous dialogue to reconcile divergent national priorities while maintaining alignment with CFSP objectives. Financial instruments under EEAS control, such as the European Peace Facility and NDICI, provide the flexibility to operationalize initiatives in governance, security, and sustainable development. Embedding standardized reporting and monitoring mechanisms ensures accountability and allows for performance measurement across diverse regional contexts. Strengthening administrative and managerial capacity in member states fosters professionalization and reduces the risk of policy fragmentation. Harmonization of procedures and norms across projects improves efficiency and facilitates cross-border collaboration. Strategic prioritization allows resources to be concentrated where they can achieve the greatest impact, enhancing EU influence and credibility. Integration of capacity-building with policy guidance ensures that interventions are both sustainable and locally owned. Adaptive management enables the EU to respond effectively to shifting geopolitical dynamics and emerging crises within these regions. Ultimately, this approach creates a coherent framework in which regional engagement, governance strengthening, and CFSP objectives are mutually reinforcing, promoting stability, resilience, and alignment with European values.

28.Strengthening Regional Cooperation

Strengthening regional cooperation in Europe requires a multi-dimensional approach that combines institutional, economic, security, and socio-political measures. Institutional and governance measures play a critical role in this regard. Enhancing EU cohesion instruments can strengthen the role of macro-regional strategies, such as those in the Baltic Sea, Adriatic-Ionian, and Danube regions, which serve to coordinate cross-border development and infrastructure projects. Harmonizing national regulations on trade, energy, digital standards, and environmental protection reduces friction and fosters integration across the continent. Subregional governance bodies, including the Visegrád Group, Benelux, and the Nordic Council, can serve as laboratories for deeper cooperation that informs EU-wide policy development.

Economic and infrastructure integration constitutes another essential pillar. Investing in cross-border infrastructure such as high-speed rail, road networks, and energy interconnectors creates tangible links between regions, facilitating mobility and commerce. The promotion of regional industrial clusters through joint ventures, research and development hubs, and innovation corridors is particularly important in sectors where Europe seeks global leadership, including green technologies, artificial intelligence, and biotechnology. Financial mechanisms,

particularly EU structural and cohesion funds, should prioritize projects that foster regional cooperation rather than solely national development.

Security and defense cooperation also requires attention. Developing regional defense initiatives under the Permanent Structured Cooperation framework can address shared threats, including cyber and hybrid risks. Strengthening crisis coordination through early warning systems and civil protection mechanisms is vital in regions prone to environmental disasters or migration pressures. Moreover, enhancing border security integration, through frameworks such as Frontex as well as bilateral and regional agreements, ensures mobility is managed effectively while maintaining compliance with Schengen norms.

Energy and environmental collaboration represents a further dimension of regional cooperation. Building cross-border energy grids and pipelines reduces dependency on single suppliers and increases resilience to disruptions. Coordinated environmental initiatives, particularly those aimed at protecting shared river basins, seas, and biodiversity hotspots, ensure sustainable development. Collaboration on regional renewable energy projects and circular economy initiatives supports the collective achievement of EU climate and sustainability goals.

Socio-cultural and people-to-people initiatives provide an additional layer of integration. Expanding educational and research programs, including Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe, as well as regional university networks, strengthens cross-border academic ties. Supporting joint cultural heritage and tourism initiatives reinforces a shared European identity. Encouraging cross-border civil society networks enables local ownership of cooperation efforts and fosters community-level engagement.

Finally, effective policy tools and strategic approaches are necessary to ensure cohesion and sustainability. Creating regional observatories for economic, environmental, and social indicators can guide evidence-based policy making. Developing long-term regional strategies facilitates anticipation of economic shifts, migration trends, and geopolitical risks. Ensuring that subregional initiatives are linked to EU-level planning maintains coherence, avoids duplication of effort, and maximizes the impact of regional cooperation. Overall, regional cooperation in Europe is most effective when institutional frameworks, economic integration, security coordination, energy and environmental collaboration, and cultural ties are pursued simultaneously. Subregions should act as testbeds for innovation, while the European Union provides alignment, oversight, and resource support, with the overarching goal of creating a connected, resilient, and strategically integrated Europe.

In other words, pressure from outside is welcome. At least for those of us who have the political will and conceptual skill and the emotional commitment to organise and unite Europe rather than benefitting from other people's misfortune and being an ineffective and dogmatic self-serving scoundrel and an envious bureaucratic rival, in short, parasites on a bygone era whose vices they incarnate.

Balla Ciao, Bella Ciao, Bella Ciao, Ciao, Ciao.

29.Revisiting the EU as a regional actor

The European Union's engagement in the post–Cold War era represents a complex interplay of strategic ambition, operational execution, and normative projection. In the decades following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the EU has sought to assert its influence not merely through economic integration but also by shaping security, governance, and stability across neighboring regions. This multidimensional approach reflects an understanding that effective foreign policy requires the harmonization of strategic vision, the capacity to act operationally, and the consistent promotion of EU norms and values.

This paper examines the viability and coherence of the EU's approach through a four-pronged analytical framework: (1) the EU's strategy toward subregional frameworks, which seeks to stabilize and integrate areas bordering or proximate to the Union; (2) the EU Crisis Management Concept, which operationalizes rapid response, conflict prevention, and resilience-building; (3) the evolution of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), which strengthens the Union's military and

civilian capabilities in support of strategic objectives; and (4) the EU Enlargement Strategy, which extends the Union's normative and institutional influence to aspiring member states.

By cross-tabulating these four frameworks with the dimensions of strategic policy design, operational capacity, and normative influence, this study highlights the synergies and tensions inherent in EU action. It interrogates the degree to which strategy aligns with execution, and whether normative ambitions are effectively translated into measurable impact. Ultimately, the paper contends that a coherent and sustainable EU external action requires not only the integration of these dimensions but also institutional consolidation, systematic evaluation, and the embedding of operational activities within a clear strategic vision.

Table

EU Framework	Strategic Policy Design	Operational Capacity	Normative Influence
Strategy toward Subregionals	Formulation of coherent objectives for stability, governance, and resilience across subregions; aligning regional engagement with CFSP priorities	Limited operational mechanisms; relies on partner coordination and program implementation	Promotes EU norms, values, and rules-based governance; encourages local ownership and capacity-building
Crisis Management Concept	Establishes EU-level strategies for conflict prevention, crisis anticipation, and decision-making structures	Direct operational planning and deployment of civilian and military instruments; rapid response capabilities	Supports normative objectives by embedding legal frameworks, human rights, and EU principles into interventions
Evolution of the CSDP	Strategic integration of security and defense objectives into EU foreign policy; long-term planning for EU-wide capabilities	Enhances EU operational capacity through common military/civilian missions, interoperability, and joint capabilities	Strengthens normative influence via EU-led missions that model standards for governance, rule of law, and conflict resolution
EU Enlargement Strategy	Strategic policy guiding political, economic, and institutional alignment of candidate countries	Limited direct operational capacity; relies on technical assistance, monitoring, and program support	Strong normative component: spreads EU values, rule of law, democratic governance, and economic

			norms across new members

Key Observations

The EU's approach toward subregional frameworks demonstrates a pronounced emphasis on strategic planning and the promotion of normative values, though it exhibits relatively limited operational capacity. The Crisis Management Concept reflects a well-rounded integration across strategic, operational, and normative dimensions, with particular strength in the Union's ability to plan and execute rapid responses. The evolution of the CSDP places operational capacity at the forefront, supported by coherent strategic design and reinforced through missions that embed EU norms in practice. Meanwhile, the Enlargement Strategy is characterized by a strong normative focus, guiding political and institutional alignment across candidate and neighboring states, while its operational dimension remains largely indirect.

Given the EU trust the enlargement process more than the other three components integral to the collective response to the fall of the wall, it is surprising only the winning team has been subject to examination and not the other three components, making the EU into a wobbly actor in Europe and adjacent areas. To ensure that the CSDP, the EU Crisis Management Concept, sub-regional strategies, and the Enlargement Strategy mutually reinforce each other, it is necessary to establish a coherent framework that aligns strategic objectives, operational planning, and normative ambitions across all initiatives. This requires integrated ends–ways–means planning, institutional consolidation to coordinate resources and expertise, systematic monitoring and evaluation to measure impact, and mechanisms to translate normative principles into actionable programs.

Certainly, the EEAS –DG DEFIS should not spend more than 30% of its time on modernization of the member states militaries with the remainder focused on providing security to Europe and its citizens.

Recommendations

Consolidate Strategic Coherence Across EU External Action The EU should develop a unified, overarching framework that integrates subregional engagement, crisis management, the evolution of the CSDP, and enlargement initiatives. This framework must link strategic objectives to operational execution and normative ambitions, ensuring that every initiative, from conflict prevention to governance promotion, contributes to a coherent, long-term vision. By embedding strategic foresight and scenario planning, the Union can anticipate emerging threats, align resources efficiently, and avoid fragmented or reactive policy approaches.

Enhance Operational Capacity and Rapid Response Mechanisms Operational readiness must become a cornerstone of EU external action. Investment is needed in interoperable command-and-control architectures, integrated logistics networks, and joint deployment mechanisms that seamlessly coordinate civilian and military instruments. This includes improving strategic mobility, cross-border transport corridors, rapid airlift and sealift capabilities, and standardized operational procedures across Member States. Strengthening the EU's ability to project force or support missions efficiently will amplify both credibility and influence.

Operationalize Normative Objectives Through Measurable Impact Norms and values—democracy, rule of law, human rights, and sustainable development—should not remain aspirational but be embedded in every operational and strategic initiative. This requires the systematic translation of EU principles into programmatic design, supported by measurable indicators of effectiveness. Clear benchmarks, continuous monitoring, and adaptive learning loops will allow the EU to ensure that its normative influence generates tangible outcomes on the ground while reinforcing local governance structures.

Institutionalize Knowledge, Coordination, and Continuity To overcome fragmentation and ensure policy coherence, a dedicated office within the EEAS should consolidate institutional expertise, coordinate multi-year programs, harmonize resource allocation, and maintain a continuous feedback loop across all external action domains. This office would serve as the nexus for operational planning, evaluation, and knowledge transfer, ensuring that lessons learned inform future interventions and that all initiatives align with CFSP objectives.

Calibrate Engagement in Geopolitically Sensitive Regions EU actions, particularly in regions involving Russia or contested geopolitical environments, must be carefully calibrated to focus on operationally feasible and normatively safe sectors. Areas such as environmental stewardship, infrastructure resilience, climate adaptation, and scientific collaboration offer high-value engagement without compromising strategic autonomy. This risk-aware approach preserves EU influence, minimizes vulnerability to external pressure, and reinforces credibility in multilateral forums.

Implement Robust, Continuous Evaluation Systematic evaluation is essential for strategic refinement and accountability. Standardized performance indicators, combined with epikrisis-based assessment of outputs, outcomes, and long-term impact, will enable the EU to assess effectiveness, adapt policies dynamically, and

maintain alignment with strategic priorities. Evaluation mechanisms should be integrated from program design through completion, fostering a culture of learning and evidence-based decision-making.

Promote Local Ownership and Sustainable Capacity-Building Sustainable impact requires embedding local actors and institutions into the planning, governance, and execution of EU initiatives. Co-ownership ensures interventions are contextually appropriate, culturally legitimate, and resilient over time. Strengthening local capacity not only reinforces operational outcomes but also extends the Union's normative influence, creating enduring partnerships that advance governance, stability, and adherence to EU values.

Integrate Ends–Ways–Means Planning Across All Initiatives Finally, all EU action should adopt a systematic ends–ways–means approach, linking clearly defined objectives with operational strategies and allocated resources. This integrated planning ensures that every initiative is purposeful, coherent, and measurable, reducing redundancy, improving efficiency, and maximizing the Union's strategic leverage in a complex, multi-domain geopolitical environment.

Figure Sitting between two chairs over a crevice

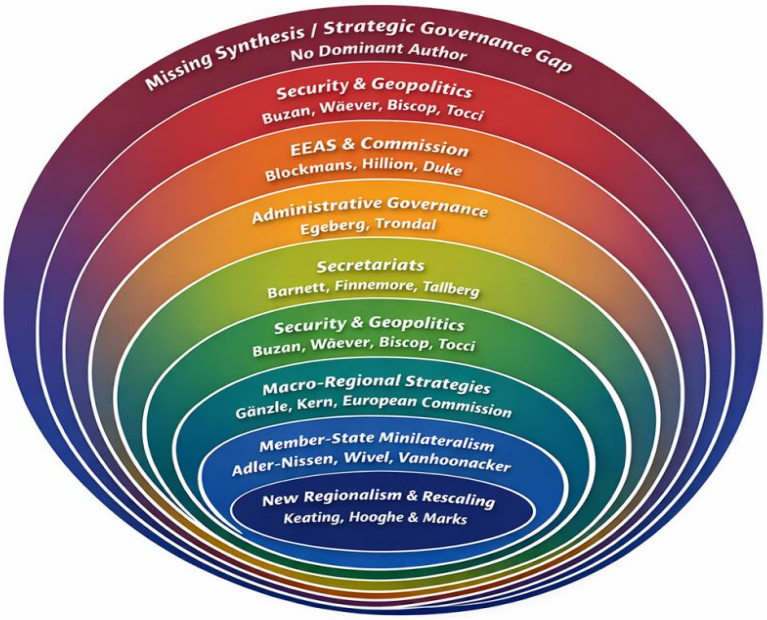
30. Understanding the EU as European actor

The literature on European sub-regionals depicts them as durable, function-driven governance layers that coexist with, rather than challenge, EU-level integration. Conceptually, they are best explained through multi-level governance and new regionalism theories, which emphasise rescaling, functional cooperation, and coalition-building among member states. Sub-regionals such as Benelux, the Nordics, V4, the Baltics, MED7, and macro-regional strategies operate as intermediaries between national capitals and Brussels. Empirically, most studies show that these formats emerge where policy externalities, geographic proximity, or shared security concerns exceed the capacity of individual states. The European Commission dominates the literature on macro-regional strategies, framing them as soft coordination tools without new institutions or legal authority. This has led to a technocratic reading of sub-regionals, centred on funding alignment, cohesion policy, and regulatory convergence.

By contrast, the EEAS features only marginally in this literature, despite sub-regionals' growing geopolitical and security relevance. Existing institutional analyses portray the EEAS as a strategic coordinator with limited control over financial and implementation instruments. The result is a structural grey zone in which sub-regional initiatives fall between Commission-led programming and EEAS-led diplomacy. Member-state-driven minilateralism literature shows that sub-regionals often pre-shape EU positions before formal EU decision-making begins. Small and medium states use these formats to amplify influence and manage asymmetries within the Union.

Secretariats are addressed unevenly, with most studies treating them as administrative supports rather than autonomous actors. Where analysed, secretariats are shown to generate continuity, policy memory, and informal agenda-setting power. Highly institutionalised secretariats, such as Benelux or the Nordic Council, display greater strategic capacity than rotating or deliberately weak structures like the V4. Overall, the literature lacks an integrated framework linking sub-regionals to EU executive governance. In particular, the interaction between sub-regional secretariats, the Commission, the EEAS, and national administrations remains under-theorised. This gap limits the EU's ability to leverage sub-regionals as coherent instruments of policy integration and external action.

Figure Litterary Concentricity



Concentric Circles: European Sub-Regional Literature

Innermost Circle (Core Theory – Level 1)

- **Grand Theory / New Regionalism & Rescaling**
- Authors: Michael Keating; Liesbet Hooghe & Gary Marks
- Focus: Why sub-regionals exist; rescaling; functional governance; multi-level governance[13]

Circle 2 (Differentiated Integration – Level 2)

- Authors: Frank Schimmelfennig; Dirk Leuffen; Berthold Rittberger
- Focus: Informal differentiation; flexible geometry; sub-regionals as EU integration tools

Circle 3 (Macro-Regional Strategies – Level 3)

- Authors: Stefan Gänzle; Kristine Kern; European Commission (DG REGIO)
- Focus: Soft coordination; cohesion; infrastructure; environmental management

Circle 4 (Member-State Minilateralism – Level 4)

- Authors: Rebecca Adler-Nissen; Andreas Wivel; Sophie Vanhoonacker
- Focus: Pre-coordination; coalition-building; amplifying small states' influence

Circle 5 (EU Administrative Governance – Level 5)

- Authors: Morten Egeberg; Jarle Trondal
- Focus: Shared administrative space; EU officials across national/sub-regional levels

Circle 6 (Secretariats as Bureaucratic Actors – Level 6)

- Authors: Michael Barnett; Martha Finnemore; Jonas Tallberg
- Focus: Agenda-setting, continuity, institutional autonomy

[13] file:///C:/Users/FlorTech/Downloads/EUWhoiswho_EEAS_EN-6.pdf

Circle 7 (EEAS–Commission Relations – Level 7)

- Authors: Steven Blockmans; Christophe Hillion; Simon Duke
- Focus: Division of labour; EEAS diplomacy vs Commission programming; grey zone

Circle 8 (Security & Geopolitical Sub-Regions – Level 8)

- Authors: Barry Buzan; Ole Wæver; Sven Biscop; Nathalie Tocci
- Focus: Baltic, Black Sea, Arctic, Mediterranean; security complexes; strategic autonomy

Circle 9 (Neighbourhood / External Interfaces – Level 9)

- Authors: Michael Emerson; Rosa Balfour; Nathalie Tocci
- Focus: ENP and neighbourhood strategies; sub-regional participation with non-EU actors

Outermost Circle (Missing Synthesis – Level 10)

- Authors: No dominant author
- Focus: Lack of integrated framework linking secretariats, member states, Commission, and EEAS.

To summarise , the gaps in the literature concerns evolves around integration and coherence across levels and between levels, comparable to the situation in the EEAS.

Table Gaps in the literature on the relationship between the center and the sub-regionals

Dimension	Current Literature / State	Gaps	Proposed Actions
Theoretical	Sub-regionals treated as soft coordination mechanisms (macro-regions) or member-state clubs; EEAS literature focuses on diplomacy and strategy.	- No integrated theory linking EEAS, Commission, member states, and sub-regional secretariats.- Lack of governance model positioning sub-regionals as meso-level actors.- Absence of theory on strategic integration across internal and external EU policy.	- Develop multi-level governance model treating secretariats as nodes in a network.- Apply concepts from network governance and compound administration.- Theorize sub-regionals as instruments for policy harmonization bridging Commission programming and EEAS diplomacy.
Empirical	Fragmented case studies (V4, Baltic Sea, Danube); focus mostly on cohesion, economic policy; EEAS–sub-regional interactions under-studied.	- Lack of systematic mapping of EEAS–sub-regional interactions.- Insufficient data on power, influence, and decision-making roles of secretariats.- Outcomes of sub-regional	- Conduct comparative case studies across V4, Benelux, Nordic Council, BSEC.- Collect primary data: interviews with EEAS, Commission, secretariats, member states.-

		contributions to EU external action rarely measured.	Analyse official documents: meeting minutes, joint statements, funding allocations.
Methodological	Mainly qualitative document analysis; limited network or process tracing.	- Rare application of network analysis to EEAS–sub-regional interactions.- Process tracing of policy uptake is missing.- Mixed methods combining qualitative and quantitative data underused.	- Use process tracing to follow recommendations from secretariat to EEAS/Commission decisions.- Apply network analysis to map formal and informal interactions.- Implement mixed methods: coding of documents + interviews + ethnographic observation.

Research Gaps in the litterature

The proposed fully gapanalytical strategy builds upon the theoretical, empirical, and methodological gaps identified in the literature concerning the relationship between the European External Action Service (EEAS) and European sub-regional organisations. Conceptually, sub-regional secretariats are framed as meso-level governance nodes operating within a multi-layered European system, where the EEAS functions as a strategic coordinator, the European Commission as an instrument and programming hub, and member states act as local policy hubs. This approach integrates insights from new regionalism, multi-level governance, and compound administration theory to capture the interaction dynamics and governance potential of sub-regional entities.

Table Push Ups

Theoretical Framework	**Core Concepts**	**Representative Scholars**	**Relevance to EEAS–Sub-Regional Interactions**
New Regionalism	Emergence of regions as governance actors, functional cooperation, rescaling, territorial innovation	Michael Keating, Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, Björn Hettne	Provides a framework for understanding sub-regional secretariats as autonomous yet networked governance actors within the EU system
Multi-Level Governance (MLG)	Dispersed authority, nested decision-making arenas, interplay of supranational, national, sub-national actors	Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, Fritz Scharpf, Adrienne Héritier	Offers theoretical tools to analyze how EEAS interacts with member states and sub-regional organisations in decision-making and strategy formation
Compound Administration Theory	Policy execution through overlapping	Jarle Trondal, Morten Egeberg,	Useful to study secretariats' operational role

	administrative structures, shared governance, cross-level bureaucratic networks	Sandra Van Thiel, Paul 't Hart	and EEAS integration within multi-layered EU administration

Empirically, the strategy adopts a comparative case design, focusing on selected sub-regional formats such as the Visegrád Four, the Benelux Union, the Nordic Council, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, and other relevant frameworks. The analysis spans multiple policy areas, including security, trade, energy, and environmental cohesion, to assess variation in EEAS engagement, Commission participation, and secretariat influence. Data collection combines semi-structured interviews with officials from the EEAS, relevant Commission directorates, sub-regional secretariats, and national representatives, together with document analysis of Council conclusions, joint statements, funding allocations, and meeting minutes. Where feasible, observational methods capture working group and conference interactions, providing additional insight into informal coordination mechanisms.

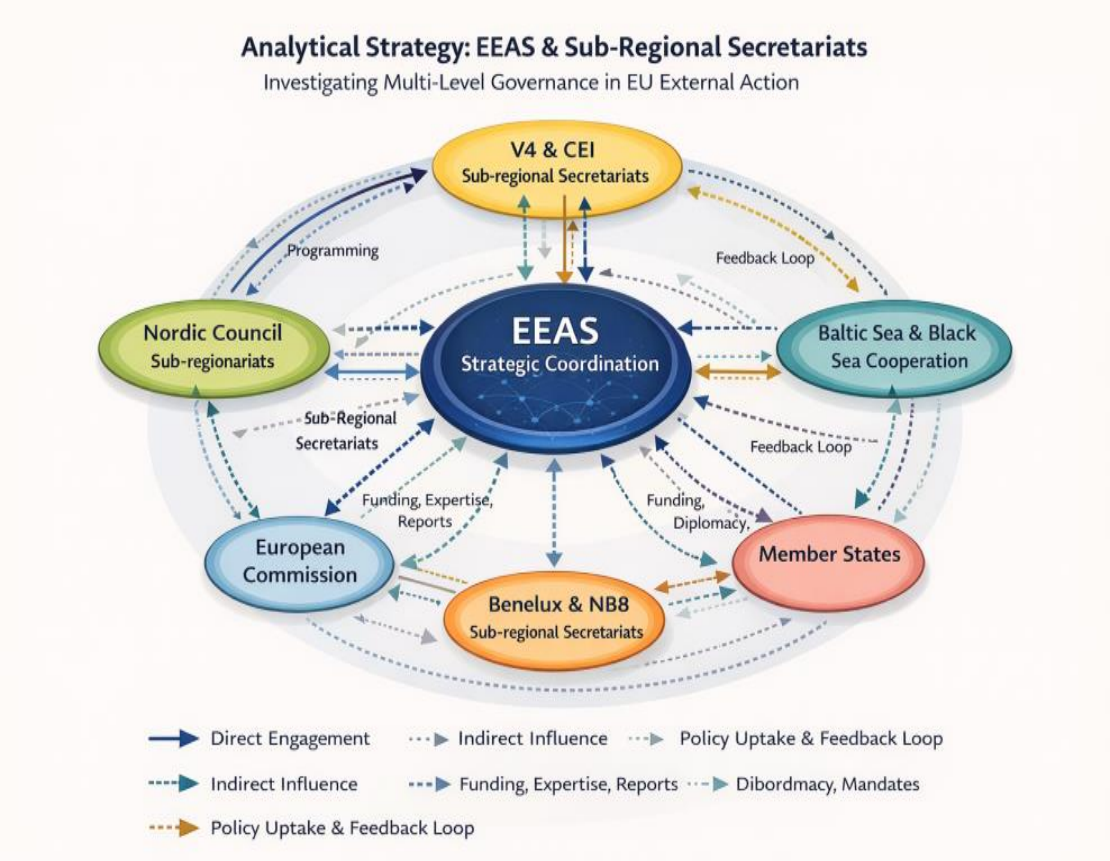
Methodologically, the strategy employs process tracing to follow how recommendations from sub-regional secretariats are adopted, modified, or blocked within EEAS and Commission structures. Network analysis maps formal and informal connections among the EEAS, Commission, member states, and sub-regional bodies, highlighting patterns of influence, communication, and institutional embedding. The integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches allows for triangulation of findings, combining coded data on outputs such as funding, joint initiatives, and policy statements with interview and observational evidence to assess the strategic impact of sub-regional inputs.

The evaluation stage identifies conditions under which sub-regional coordination contributes meaningfully to EU external action and policy coherence, while also diagnosing structural bottlenecks and interaction gaps. Findings inform recommendations for institutional design improvements, including enhanced integration of sub-regional secretariats into EU planning processes and the establishment of monitoring frameworks for sub-regional contributions to strategic EU objectives. By synthesising these elements, the analytical strategy provides both a robust theoretical lens and a practical roadmap for understanding and leveraging the role of sub-regional governance within the EU's external action architecture.

Analytical Nooks and Bits

The diagram represents a systems-based analytical model of interactions between the European External Action Service (EEAS) and sub-regional secretariats. At the center, the EEAS functions as the strategic coordinator within the EU's external action architecture. Its central position signifies both decision-making authority and responsibility for coherence, while also highlighting the networked and interdependent nature of influence across governance layers. Surrounding the EEAS are sub-regional secretariats, including the Visegrád Four and Central European Initiative, Benelux and NB8, the Nordic Council, and the Baltic and Black Sea cooperation frameworks. These secretariats are conceptualized as meso-level governance nodes capable of sharing policy through formal and informal channels, providing recommendations, expertise, and facilitating member-state coordination within their respective regional formats. The placement of secretariats around the EEAS illustrates bidirectional flows of information, policy uptake, and feedback, emphasizing the circulatory nature of influence rather than unilateral authority.

Figure Don't disturb my Spheres



Supporting hubs, represented by the European Commission and member states, are positioned around this network. The Commission contributes programming, funding, and cohesion alignment, while member states provide political legitimacy, national priorities, and diplomatic leverage. The EEAS operates within this interdependent network, relying on both administrative instruments and national political backing to implement external action effectively. Arrows in the diagram encode the nature of interaction, with solid lines indicating formal engagement between the EEAS and sub-regional secretariats, dashed lines representing indirect influence through advisory input or expertise, and dotted lines depicting policy uptake and feedback loops. These interactions reflect iterative processes in which recommendations and strategic inputs are absorbed, modified, and redistributed, illustrating the adaptive learning mechanisms inherent in EU external governance.

Analytically, the model demonstrates that EU external action is distributed across multiple governance layers, with secretariats, the Commission, member states, and the EEAS forming a dynamic network rather than a rigid hierarchy. Sub-regional secretariats are shown to possess agency, actively shaping strategic priorities and contributing to policy coherence. The feedback loops depicted highlight the iterative exchange of information and strategic input, reinforcing the continuous adaptation and learning within the system. The diagram also illuminates areas of potential coordination complexity, including overlapping responsibilities and bottlenecks, thereby identifying points where institutional efficiency could be enhanced. Finally, the model provides a framework for empirical analysis, guiding case selection, interview design, document analysis, and network mapping, thereby operationalizing the analytical strategy for systematic study of EEAS–sub-regional interactions.

Indeed, Andrew Cottey's central point in 2025—especially in his influential book *Security in 21st Century Europe*—is that **European security has been fundamentally transformed since the end of the Cold War by the emergence of a liberal regional order anchored in a "security community," in which war between European states has become highly unlikely, largely underpinned by NATO and the EU.** However, he stresses that **this post-Cold War security community now faces a growing array of external and internal challenges that strain its coherence and raise fundamental questions about its continued existence**. These include renewed great-power competition (evident in Russia's invasion of Ukraine), regional instability on Europe's periphery (such as in the Balkans and the Mediterranean), the rise of non-Western powers like China, and non-traditional threats including terrorism, migration, climate change, and cybersecurity risks. Cottey's work combines theoretical insights with detailed empirical analysis to show that while traditional inter-state war remains unlikely in Europe, contemporary security challenges are diverse, complex, and highly

interconnected, demanding strategies that bridge norms and capabilities rather than relying on old frameworks alone. His argument underscores that **Europe's liberal security architecture is resilient but not immune to pressure, so understanding and adapting to these multifaceted threats is crucial for future stability**

In this *throw back* we have examined the EU's security policy posture in response to the fall of the Wall true to ourselves than those who haven't a clue about neither strategic management, the external environment to the Brussels bubble let alone are able to distinguish between them.

So we have now discussed how the EEAS could and had better strengthen governance from the vantage point of enlargement and the original four-pronged approach: (1) Sub-regionals (2) crisis management (3) CSDP (4) Enlargement strategy.

Conclusions

Over the past three decades, the European Union has significantly evolved its approach to regional cooperation, moving from a primarily economic and trade-focused agenda toward a more comprehensive framework that integrates security, governance, and sustainable development objectives. In the 1990s, initiatives such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership emphasized economic liberalization and political dialogue, whereas the 2000s saw the emergence of macro-regional strategies, exemplified by the Baltic Sea Region Strategy and the Danube Strategy, which combined infrastructural development, environmental sustainability, and institutional capacity-building with cross-border collaboration. More recently, EU regional cooperation has become increasingly holistic, embedding digital transformation, climate resilience, and migration management into multi-level frameworks that seek to balance EU-wide priorities with local and subregional needs.

Current EU initiatives exhibit varying degrees of alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) objectives. While programs addressing energy security, conflict prevention, and rule-of-law support in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans clearly advance CFSP priorities, other initiatives, particularly those centered on economic integration or environmental sustainability, sometimes operate more tangentially, emphasizing developmental and cohesion goals over explicit security considerations. Nevertheless, the EU's integrated approach—linking diplomacy, trade, and technical assistance—has strengthened normative influence in neighboring regions, promoting stability through both direct intervention and the creation of predictable institutional frameworks.

The meaningful impacts, and this is important, of EU interventions across subregions are observable in multiple domains. In the Baltic and Adriatic Seas, EU funding and institutional support have contributed to improved maritime safety, cross-border infrastructure, and environmental protection, enhancing both economic connectivity and regional security. In the Western Balkans, EU enlargement conditionalities and capacity-building programs have fostered judicial reform, anti-corruption measures, and enhanced administrative efficiency, although political instability continues to constrain full integration. In the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe, EU-led initiatives have advanced energy interconnectivity, migration management, and crisis response mechanisms, yet results are uneven due to local governance weaknesses and external geopolitical pressures. Overall, the EU's subregional engagement demonstrates that while institutional development and infrastructure modernization are tangible, the broader objectives of normative consolidation and security enhancement often require longer-term and context-sensitive strategies.

The relationship between the European Union and its adjacent subregional organizations is marked by both promise and complexity. Across the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, the Council of the Baltic Sea States, the Union for the Mediterranean, the Arctic Council, the Euro-Arctic Council, and the South East European Cooperation Process, the EU encounters a landscape of fragmented mandates and overlapping priorities. Theoretically, multi-level governance highlights the necessity of alignment across institutional layers, yet in practice, the EU's top-down policy frameworks often collide with the horizontal, consensus-driven approaches of subregional bodies. This misalignment creates persistent coordination deficits that limit the effectiveness of joint initiatives. A fundamental gap emerges between normative aspirations and functional realities, as the EU seeks to promote democracy, rule of law, and human rights, while subregional organizations frequently prioritize pragmatic economic and security concerns. Legitimacy and representation diverge as well; the EU relies on treaty-based legitimacy and transparency, whereas many subregionals operate through informal arrangements, leaving accountability partially unfulfilled. Capacity and resource constraints exacerbate these challenges, limiting the ability of subregional bodies to absorb EU programs or respond to crises with sufficient agility. Information asymmetries further deepen the divide, as structured EU reporting often contrasts with the sporadic monitoring systems of the subregional organizations.

Empirically, BSEC demonstrates the consequences of fragmented interests and slow institutionalization, while the CBSS shows that donor dependence and external political pressures can weaken long-term effectiveness. The EEAS has also covered up implementation failure of several infrastructure, forwarded to the Parliament as implementation reports, without mentioning why they were halted or corruption led investors to flee Europe, despite an inventory of projects shared with ministers and the subregional during deliberations on an annual basis indicated something were wrong in the pipeline.

The Union for the Mediterranean has made ambitious strides, yet political crises and uneven capacities among Southern partners stall its progress. For more than twenty five years ago the mutual interdependence of the three baskets under the Euro-Mediterranean Partnerhship were abandoned in favor of a sloppy approach based on formal directives to be active. This has predictably led to a serious deterioration of the security environment in the southern Mediterranean, our near abroad, where China is number one trader of KSA, Iran and Egypt and primary import or export partner of Iraq, Algeria and Oman.

In the Arctic and Euro-Arctic Councils, environmental and research cooperation thrives, but escalating geopolitical tensions expose governance blind spots for the EU. SECEP's efforts at Southeast European cooperation are similarly undermined by inconsistent funding and a lack of institutional memory. Across all subregional actors, overlapping mandates, dependence on EU resources, and selective engagement in politically sensitive areas hinder a coherent and strategic European presence. These gaps manifest not only in institutional inefficiency but also in the EU's limited capacity to anticipate regional shocks, whether geopolitical, economic, or climate-induced. Addressing these challenges requires a reimagined approach within the EEAS, including the creation of a dedicated Subregional Affairs Unit capable of aligning EU objectives with local realities. Such a unit would monitor emerging risks, coordinate policy responses, and ensure continuity in diplomatic engagement.

Capacity-building initiatives should be prioritized to strengthen the secretariats of subregional organizations, enabling them to implement programs with autonomy and resilience. Normative bridging mechanisms could translate EU standards into actionable, locally tailored benchmarks, fostering greater coherence without imposing rigid frameworks. Integrated intelligence and analytical dashboards would equip the EU with real-time insight into political, economic, and security dynamics across subregions. Flexible diplomatic instruments, including conditionality and joint funding, would incentivize alignment while respecting the sovereignty of partner states. Scenario planning and foresight exercises could anticipate potential crises, from energy shocks to regional conflicts, and prepare coordinated EU–subregional responses. Institutionalized networks and liaison officers would reduce information asymmetries and reinforce policy coherence. By combining foresight, capacity-building, normative translation, and strategic coordination, the EU can transform reactive engagement into proactive stewardship.

This would allow the Union to preserve its credibility, uphold its values, and secure its strategic interests in regions of both historical significance and contemporary importance. In doing so, the EU would not merely manage fragmentation but cultivate resilient partnerships that withstand political turbulence and geopolitical competition. Through this comprehensive and visionary approach, Europe's subregional neighborhood could become a laboratory of integration, cooperation, and stability, reflecting both the Union's ideals and its practical ambitions. Strengthening the EEAS and EURAC is thus not an administrative task but a strategic imperative, linking the Union's normative weight with the empirical realities of regional governance. By addressing gaps in coordination, capacity, and legitimacy, the EU can ensure that subregional organizations are not peripheral actors but active partners in shaping a stable and prosperous European space. The future of the Union and its neighborhood depends on such foresight, creativity, and inspired governance. Only by reconciling theoretical ideals with empirical realities can Europe navigate the complexities of its adjacent seas, mountains, and plains with confidence, resilience, and purpose. In this vision, the EU emerges not merely as an external actor but as a partner, mentor, and anchor for regions whose stability, prosperity, and governance matter profoundly to the continent as a whole. The path forward is challenging, yet it is one where coherence, capacity, and creativity can transform fragmentation into a dynamic, interlinked European project, capable of withstanding both present pressures and future uncertainties. The EU's engagement with its subregions must therefore be deliberate, inspired, and unwavering, reflecting both the weight of history and the promise of a shared European future.

For all its ambition, the European Union often struggles to translate its rhetoric on geopolitical and geoeconomic interactions into coherent policy action. Across its neighborhood and subregional partnerships, there is a flurry of statements, declarations, and summit communiqués, yet these rarely cascade through the policymaking system in a way that produces strategic results. Insights from subregional organizations, intelligence services, and economic monitoring are frequently siloed, leaving decision-makers with incomplete or fragmented perspectives. Geopolitical conflicts—ranging from regional power rivalries and contested maritime spaces to energy transit disputes—carry immediate implications for European security. Simultaneously, geoeconomic tensions, such as investment competition, sanctions, and the vulnerability of strategic infrastructure, can amplify these risks, creating compound challenges that demand anticipatory responses. The current EU filtering mechanisms are insufficient to process such complexity; signals often reach policymakers slowly, and lessons remain partially lost in institutional layers. This disconnect fosters reactive rather than proactive approaches, reducing the Union's leverage and resilience in critical regions. European security is therefore exposed to strategic surprises, infrastructure disruption, and diminished influence in multilateral negotiations. The EU requires robust synthesis capacities—mechanisms capable of integrating intelligence, economic trends, and regional insights into coherent, actionable strategies. A strengthened EEAS, with dedicated units for subregional and geostrategic analysis, could provide the foresight and coordination currently missing. Joint scenario planning and

early-warning systems would enable the Union to anticipate crises, calibrate responses, and engage subregional partners effectively. By bridging analytical silos, translating complex threats into clear policy priorities, and aligning diplomatic and operational tools, the EU can move from rhetoric to strategy. In doing so, the Union not only safeguards its security but also strengthens its credibility, influence, and resilience in a rapidly deteriorating international environment. The imperative is clear: Europe must convert the chaotic flow of information and competing pressures into focused, decisive, and forward-looking action that anticipates rather than merely reacts. Only by embedding foresight, integration, and coordination at the heart of its geopolitical machinery can the EU navigate the intertwined challenges of geopolitics and geoeconomics with confidence and authority.

The evolutionary, incremental approach to organizing European defense—gradually building capabilities, harmonizing structures, and relying on ad hoc cooperation—has long dominated EU and NATO thinking. While this method allows for risk mitigation and political consensus, it is fundamentally misaligned with the speed, scale, and complexity of contemporary threats. Hybrid warfare, rapid technological disruption, and large-scale conventional challenges from peer competitors cannot be met by incrementalism alone. Evolutionary design tends to entrench national silos, slow decision-making, and perpetuate capability gaps, leaving the EU unable to deploy timely, coherent, and deterrent forces across its territory.

Looking forward, Europe's defense architecture is likely to undergo transformative shifts. Integrated command-and-control structures, pooled procurement and industrial strategies, and cross-border rapid deployment units will become central. The increasing digitization of warfare—cyber, AI-enabled ISR, and autonomous systems—demands unified doctrine and standardized interoperability that incremental reforms cannot achieve. Moreover, strategic autonomy pressures, geopolitical competition, and lessons from recent crises suggest that European states will increasingly prioritize collective capabilities over purely national ones, moving toward a design that is both more centralized and more adaptive. In short, evolutionary design is no longer sufficient: future European defense will require systemic, deliberately planned transformations capable of matching the pace and multidimensionality of modern threats.

In so far as Russia is concerned, the EU leaders and the EU Commission long held the view that this was a begin power interested in peace and a new Europe inclusive of Russia, and ignored warnings from Ukraine about the nature of the Russian state and its inherent aggressiveness and expansionist drift. Moreover NATO MAP was denied in 2008 at the NATO Bucharest meeting that led to war, since Putin was quick to see the opportunity.

BSEC exemplifies how competing national agendas and weak institutionalization can slow decision-making, highlighting the need for EU guidance that aligns member priorities with strategic objectives. The CBSS demonstrates the fragility of donor-dependent frameworks, underscoring the importance of capacity-building initiatives and sustained EU engagement to preserve policy continuity. The Union for the Mediterranean reveals how political crises and uneven development among partners can stall integration, emphasizing the need for flexible instruments that combine incentives with normative guidance. Arctic and Euro-Arctic cooperation illustrates the tension between scientific collaboration and geopolitical contestation, demanding that the EU maintain credible presence and influence in resource-sensitive regions. SECEP's challenges in Southeast Europe point to the consequences of limited institutional memory and inconsistent funding, showing the urgency of long-term strategic planning. Across these subregions, the EU's capacity to translate information into coordinated action is critical to prevent fragmentation and strengthen security. Liaison officers, integrated monitoring platforms, and specialized analytical units can bridge the gap between field realities and Brussels-based decision-making. Enhanced foresight exercises and scenario modeling will allow the Union to anticipate crises before they escalate, ensuring proactive rather than reactive engagement. By embedding these tools into the EEAS and EURAC, the EU can harmonize normative goals with empirical realities, projecting stability even amid uncertainty. Ultimately, success depends on combining strategic vision, operational discipline, and deep understanding of subregional dynamics to safeguard Europe's security and prosperity in an increasingly contested environment.

After having examined the evolution in the EU Commission's and the EEAS approach to the subregionals as informed by Hooghe & Keating and a little bit of Wæver post hoc with a twist of Cottey in the arese,, we ascertain that this is not a strategic approach geared to assert control over the environment nor is integrated into the CFSP fabric but mirrors the EU's dense multilateral order with associated cigarboxes, coordinated by the EEAS aka as an implementation report at the point of the annual institutional discharge. To be both strategic, have an impact on the ground and dovetail with the CFSP objectives and values, the following are necessary:

First, Central to this transformation is the establishment of a **dedicated EU office for subregional cooperation within the EEAS**. Currently, engagement across frameworks such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, the Council of the Baltic Sea States, Barents/Euro-Arctic cooperation, the Arctic Council, and the Union for the Mediterranean is fragmented, with responsibilities dispersed across multiple desks, European Commission services, and member state representations. This dispersion limits strategic coherence, weakens normative alignment, and hampers the systematic monitoring of impact. A dedicated office would consolidate institutional knowledge, harmonize objectives, and ensure that purposeful activities are deliberately linked to CFSP

priorities. It would serve as a focal point for strategic planning, evaluation, and reporting, transforming annual implementation assessments into **forward-looking guidance capable of shaping operational decision-making**.

Second, the office would also strengthen **institutional memory and policy continuity**, allowing the EU to leverage lessons learned across subregions, coordinate multi-year programs, and respond more effectively to emerging security, economic, and environmental challenges. By facilitating direct engagement with regional actors, national administrations, and local stakeholders, it would enhance ownership, capacity-building, and the sustainability of EU interventions. Critically, it would enable the EU to integrate **normative objectives with operational delivery**, ensuring that each activity, from cross-border infrastructure to climate adaptation initiatives, contributes to measurable political, economic, social, and environmental impact in line with CFSP objectives and EU values.

Third, EU regional cooperation must **systematically integrate normative objectives with operational delivery**. Activities should not only produce measurable outputs, such as completed infrastructure projects or trained officials, but also contribute to longer-term strategic goals, including human rights protection, climate resilience, cross-border integration, and stability. By linking tangible interventions to normative and strategic priorities, the EU can ensure that its regional engagement transcends procedural compliance and produces **lasting, measurable impact**, fully aligned with the CFSP's objectives and values.

Fourth, The cross-analysis of EU engagement across the Black Sea, Baltic, Barents/Euro-Arctic, Arctic, and Union for the Mediterranean subregions illustrates both the **breadth of EU objectives and the fragmentation of current operational practices**. While each subregion pursues specific strategic ends—ranging from regional stability, governance, and economic integration to environmental protection and climate resilience—the mechanisms through which these objectives are pursued are dispersed across multiple EU institutions and funding streams. Purposeful activities, whether infrastructure projects, governance capacity-building, or scientific cooperation, are often **implemented in parallel rather than as components of a coordinated strategy**, limiting their cumulative impact and alignment with CFSP priorities.

Establishing a **dedicated EU office for subregional cooperation within the EEAS** would address these structural and operational gaps. Such an office could serve as the central node linking **ends, ways, and means**: ensuring that strategic objectives across subregions are coherently defined and operationalized, that purposeful activities are designed with measurable outcomes, and that resources—financial, institutional, and normative—are allocated efficiently. By consolidating oversight, the office would strengthen **institutional memory, facilitate cross-regional learning, and harmonize reporting mechanisms**, transforming episodic implementation reports into strategic guidance and continuous evaluation.

Moreover, the office would embed **comparison and evaluation (epikrisis) directly into the policy cycle**, applying standardized KPIs across regions to monitor security, governance, economic, environmental, and normative impact. This systematic assessment would enable the EU to identify where activities achieve meaningful results, where adjustments are required, and how regional engagement contributes to the broader CFSP agenda. In operational terms, the office would link the planning of purposeful activities to tangible outcomes on the ground, ensuring that each intervention—from cross-border energy corridors to climate adaptation projects—advances EU norms, strengthens local institutions, and reinforces regional stability and resilience.

In essence, a dedicated EEAS subregional office reincarnated in Eurarc 1.2.3.would transform the EU's engagement from procedural multilateral presence to strategic, outcome-oriented action, harmonizing its ends, ways, and means across diverse regions, embedding purposeful activities in a measurable framework, and ensuring that subregional cooperation both reflects and reinforces the EU's CFSP objectives and values.

In sum, moving from a fragmented, procedural approach to a strategically orchestrated, impact-driven model requires both deliberate design of purposeful activities and the institutional capacity to ensure they achieve tangible results. The establishment of a dedicated EEAS office for subregional cooperation is thus essential: it consolidates authority and expertise, aligns operational activities with CFSP goals, and ensures that the EU's engagement in subregional frameworks is coherent, credible, and capable of producing measurable impact on the ground.

The idea that organisational structure follows strategy only works cleanly under certain conditions, and even then it comes with important limitations. It tends to hold when a strategy is clear, stable, and widely understood across the organisation. People need to know what the priorities are before a structure can be designed to support them. It also depends on leadership alignment. If leaders share the same direction and have the ability to manage change, then structural adjustments can genuinely support strategic goals. Resources must also match the ambition. A strategy that requires new capabilities or cross-functional work cannot be delivered by overstretched teams or outdated systems. Culture plays a major role as well. If the prevailing norms support collaboration, learning, and adaptability, then a new structure can take root. Finally, the organisation needs the capacity to implement change, including project management, monitoring, and the ability to translate strategy into everyday processes.

The dictum breaks down when existing structures shape or limit strategy rather than the other way around.

Organisations often choose strategies that fit what they already have, because changing structure is politically and operationally costly. Silos can distort both strategy and structure by blocking information flows and reinforcing competing priorities. Even a well-designed structure will fail if the culture rewards risk avoidance, hierarchy, or protecting turf. Leadership turnover can also disrupt the link between strategy and structure, as new leaders bring new priorities before previous changes have taken hold. Resource constraints force compromises that create mismatches between what the strategy demands and what the structure can support. Implementation gaps are another major reason the dictum fails. Even with a clear strategy and a redesigned structure, change will stall if middle managers resist, incentives remain unchanged, or processes stay the same.

The European Union's engagement with subregional frameworks—such as BSEC, the Council of the Baltic Sea States, Barents/Euro-Arctic cooperation, the Arctic Council, and the Union for the Mediterranean—aims to promote regional stability, governance, and resilience. However, current practices are fragmented, procedural, and largely limited to reporting cycles, with dispersed institutional responsibilities and inconsistent alignment with CFSP objectives. Effective engagement requires a dedicated EEAS office to consolidate knowledge, coordinate multi-year programs, harmonize resources, and embed measurable KPIs within a strategic framework linking operational initiatives to clear objectives, from conflict prevention to normative promotion. EU cooperation with Russia must focus on operationally feasible and normatively safe areas, while all regional engagement should integrate local ownership, capacity-building, and systematic impact evaluation. This approach emphasizes strategic coherence, sustainable influence, and a shift from ad hoc participation to structured, measurable, and policy-aligned regional cooperation.

A more realistic way to think about this relationship is that strategy, structure, culture, leadership, and resources all need to evolve together. None of them can succeed in isolation, and none of them reliably leads the others in a simple linear sequence. If you want, I can now apply this logic to the EU's external action or its regional governance challenges.

The theoretical implications are that scholarly work on European governance underscores the need for stronger strategic leadership within the EU's diplomatic services, particularly as the Union navigates an increasingly fragmented and multi-level political landscape. Michael Keating's analysis of territorial politics highlights how Europe's governance architecture has evolved into a complex constellation of sub-state, state, and supranational arenas, requiring coordinated strategic direction to avoid incoherence and policy drift.

The EU's crisis management concept outlines the political and operational framework for responding to security challenges in Europe and beyond. Effective crisis management depends on the availability of military capabilities that are ready, interoperable, and deployable. Current gaps between conceptual planning and actual capability levels can limit the EU's ability to respond rapidly and decisively. Aligning military capabilities with the crisis management concept ensures that the EU can implement its strategic priorities in real-world operations. Capability development must be guided by the types of crises the EU expects to face, from hybrid and cyber threats to conventional conflicts. Joint planning, pooled resources, and collaborative procurement are key tools to bridge the gap between concept and capability. Research, innovation, and technological investment must anticipate emerging threats to support future crisis management needs. Training, exercises, and standardization across Member States are essential to operationalize the crisis management concept effectively. Coordination with NATO and other partners reinforces the EU's ability to project coherent military responses. Overall, matching crisis management concepts with military capabilities is critical for the EU to maintain credibility, resilience, and strategic autonomy in a complex security environment.

Similarly, the multi-level governance framework developed by Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks demonstrates that authority in the EU is dispersed across overlapping jurisdictions, networks, and functional regimes. In such a system, effective external action depends on the capacity of central institutions—especially the EEAS—to orchestrate, align, and strategically steer diverse actors operating at different territorial scales. Their work suggests that without a stronger strategic centre, the EU risks reactive rather than anticipatory diplomacy, fragmented representation in sub-regional forums, and diminished capacity to project norms and interests. Strengthened leadership within the diplomatic service is therefore essential not only for coherence but also for ensuring that the EU can leverage the opportunities of multi-level governance, manage territorial diversity, and assert influence in sub-regional environments where external actors increasingly compete for authority. This literature collectively reinforces the argument that a more strategically empowered EEAS is a structural requirement of the EU's evolving governance model, not merely an organisational preference.

One must be an uniquely incompetent idiot, a clown or a Pedarast with an identity problem not to see that in the absence of the reiteration of the Helsinki Headline Goals, Europe could fall to the invading horde of Huns, Russian barbarians and crude and tenacious wolverines throwing themselves at our throats out of the unfrozen steppes.[14]

Pace strategists like Alexander Stubb and Christian Ilcus, the European Union, as a security actor, will face an evolving strategic environment characterized by hybrid

[14] https://www.valisluureamet.ee/doc/raport/2026-en.pdf

threats, grey-zone conflicts, cyber operations, and the enduring relevance of conventional deterrence. In this context, the development of a European concept of warfare requires alignment with the EU's political identity, technological capabilities, economic leverage, and normative objectives. Modern conflicts increasingly operate across multiple domains, including land, sea, air, space, cyber, and information, necessitating an integrated approach that emphasizes interoperability among member states' armed forces while maintaining coordination with NATO when appropriate.

Hybrid threats, encompassing disinformation, economic coercion, and proxy warfare, underscore the need for civil-military coordination and the resilience of critical infrastructures. Technologically driven deterrence, leveraging artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, and precision capabilities, provides a means of offsetting numerical disadvantages relative to global powers, while doctrine should prioritize agility and adaptability. The EU's strategic concept should further integrate civilian tools alongside military instruments, including economic sanctions, digital influence operations, infrastructure protection, and rapid deployment of civilian-military units.

Effective crisis management and rapid response require flexible operational doctrines that enable multinational forces to conduct stabilization missions, humanitarian interventions, or deterrence signaling in regions of strategic interest. Resilience, both societal and institutional, must constitute a core component of the European approach, encompassing energy security, supply chain robustness, cybersecurity, and strategic communication. Operationally, a European doctrine would necessitate highly interoperable and mobile forces under multinational command structures, supported by decision-making mechanisms capable of rapid action at the EU level.

Partnerships with NATO remain essential; however, strategic autonomy should allow the EU to act independently in hybrid scenarios where alliance consensus is delayed. The European concept of warfare should thus be understood as a framework for resilient, integrated, and hybrid-aware defense, combining hard and soft power to maximize the EU's unique advantages. In sum, rather than emulating traditional state-centric doctrines, the EU's approach should leverage technological innovation, societal resilience, and normative influence to address contemporary security challenges.

I expect that our EU military prepare for all operational scenarios on the basis of a professional military organisation , and that the EEAS discharges its duties to the citizens of Europe and our beloved leaders in terms of regular reporting on a Joint Threat monitoring matrix, after the drone directorate of DG Defense has been established by mid 2026 and the EU 4Spaces Strategy has been published. The scaling-up challenges at Frontex will also have to be solved by 2027 out of the 120,000 EIBM system, and the relationship between the drone directorate and the EU SpecOp –eusocom-and the standing corpse of Frontex will by then have been clarified.

Further research

Here comes a set of **clear, original theoretical propositions** that directly address the gap you identified: the absence of an integrated framework linking **sub-regional cooperation to EU executive governance**. These propositions draw on—but go beyond—the existing literature (Keating, Hooghe & Marks, multi-level governance, differentiated integration, European executive politics) to articulate what is currently missing and what a new research agenda should examine.

Proposition 1: Sub-regional organisations function as intermediate executive arenas within the EU's multi-level governance system.
Existing literature treats sub-regional bodies as political or functional cooperation platforms, but not as *executive nodes* that shape policy implementation, agenda-setting, and norm diffusion. A new framework should conceptualise them as intermediary layers that mediate between EU-level priorities and national administrative systems.

Proposition 2: The interaction between sub-regional secretariats and EU institutions constitutes a form of "distributed executive authority." While the Commission and the EEAS hold formal competences, sub-regional secretariats exercise informal but significant agenda-setting and coordination power. This distributed authority remains under-theorised and requires analytical tools that capture both formal and informal executive dynamics.

Proposition 3: Sub-regional cooperation generates "executive spillovers" that influence EU policy coherence.
Activities in the Baltic Sea, Black Sea, Barents/Euro-Arctic, and Mediterranean formats often produce policy initiatives that later feed into EU strategies. These bottom-up spillovers are rarely examined in EU governance literature, which tends to focus on top-down dynamics.

Proposition 4: The Commission and EEAS engage in "executive orchestration" of sub-regional bodies, but the mechanisms remain poorly understood. The EU often uses funding, expertise, and political signalling to steer sub-regional agendas without hierarchical control. This orchestration role—distinct from intergovernmental bargaining or supranational authority—requires a dedicated theoretical lens.

Proposition 5: National administrations act as gatekeepers that filter EU influence into sub-regional arenas.
Member states' ministries and agencies mediate how EU priorities are translated into sub-regional cooperation. Their role is decisive but under-studied, especially

regarding administrative coordination, preference formation, and cross-border bureaucratic networks.

Proposition 6: Sub-regional formats create "parallel diplomatic channels" that interact with, but are not fully integrated into, the EU's external action system. The EEAS literature focuses on bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, but sub-regional diplomacy—CBSS, BEAC, UfM, EMGF, Black Sea Synergy—remains analytically marginal. A new framework should treat these as structured diplomatic ecosystems with their own logics of influence.

Proposition 7: The absence of a central coordinating node within the EU leads to fragmented executive engagement across sub-regions. This fragmentation is not merely organisational but theoretical: existing scholarship lacks models explaining how multiple EU actors (DGs, EEAS, agencies, delegations) coordinate—or fail to coordinate—across sub-regional settings.

Proposition 8: Sub-regional cooperation acts as a laboratory for differentiated integration and experimental governance. Sub-regions often pioneer policy innovations (e.g., Baltic environmental governance, Barents climate adaptation, Black Sea blue economy) that later scale to the EU level. Theoretical work has not yet connected these experimental dynamics to the broader literature on EU executive politics.

Proposition 9: A comprehensive theory must integrate territorial politics with executive governance. Keating's work on territoriality and Hooghe & Marks' multi-level governance provide foundations, but neither fully explains how executive functions—coordination, implementation, monitoring—operate across sub-regional layers. A new framework must bridge these literatures.

Proposition 10: Sub-regionalism should be theorised as a strategic resource for EU executive capacity. Rather than treating sub-regions as peripheral or merely functional, theory should recognise them as platforms through which the EU extends its administrative reach, strengthens policy coherence, and counters external influence.

Counter-arguments

Strengthening governance may infringe on the sovereignty of individual member states, leading to resistance from national governments that prioritize their autonomy over regional cooperation.

Increased governance structures can lead to bureaucratic inefficiencies, slowing down decision-making processes and complicating the implementation of policies.

The political landscapes of subregions vary significantly, making it challenging to create a one-size-fits-all governance model. This diversity can lead to conflicts and disagreements among member states.

Strengthening governance may require significant financial and human resources, which could be better allocated to direct development projects rather than administrative overhead.

Enhanced governance might lead to overregulation, stifling innovation and flexibility in addressing local issues. This could hinder the ability of subregions to respond effectively to unique challenges.

There may be public resistance to perceived external control or intervention in local affairs, leading to a lack of support for governance initiatives and undermining their effectiveness.

Strengthening governance could lead to fragmentation of efforts if different subregions pursue divergent paths, creating inconsistencies in policy implementation and outcomes.

Enhanced governance may exacerbate geopolitical tensions, particularly with non-EU countries that feel threatened by increased EU influence in their regions.

These counterarguments highlight the complexities and potential drawbacks of strengthening governance in European subregional frameworks, emphasizing the need for careful consideration and balance in policy design.

Scenarios

One scenario involves a member state expressing concerns about sovereignty, leading to a public debate on the balance between regional cooperation and national autonomy. This could result in a referendum or political pushback against EU governance initiatives.

Another scenario could see the establishment of a new governance structure that inadvertently creates bureaucratic inefficiencies. Decision-making processes may become prolonged, causing frustration among stakeholders and delaying important projects.

In a different scenario, the diverse political contexts of subregions may lead to conflicts during governance discussions. Member states with differing priorities might struggle to agree on common policies, resulting in a fragmented approach to regional issues.

A scenario may arise where the financial and human resources required for strengthening governance are diverted from direct development projects. This could lead to criticism from local communities that feel neglected in favor of administrative efforts.

There might be a situation where enhanced governance leads to overregulation, stifling innovation. Local businesses could find it challenging to adapt to new regulations, resulting in economic stagnation in certain areas.

Public resistance could manifest in protests or campaigns against perceived external control. This scenario may

undermine the legitimacy of governance initiatives and create a divide between local populations and EU institutions.

In another scenario, different subregions may pursue divergent governance paths, leading to inconsistencies in policy implementation. This fragmentation could create confusion and weaken the overall effectiveness of regional cooperation.

Lastly, geopolitical tensions may escalate if non-EU countries perceive strengthened governance as a threat. This could lead to diplomatic strains and hinder collaborative efforts in addressing shared challenges.

These scenarios illustrate the potential complexities and challenges associated with strengthening governance in European subregional frameworks.

Policy recommendations

We are recommending for enhancing the effectiveness of EU regional cooperation in line with Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) objectives:

Establish a dedicated EU office for subregional cooperation within the European External Action Service (EEAS). This office would consolidate authority and expertise, aligning operational activities with CFSP goals and ensuring coherent engagement across subregions. It could built on the Eurac Unit.

Merge existing frameworks such as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) to streamline objectives and enhance institutional coordination. A unified framework would reduce duplication and improve the efficiency of resource allocation.

Develop a comprehensive Key Performance Indicator (KPI) framework to systematically evaluate the impact of regional cooperation initiatives. This framework should include quantitative metrics, qualitative indicators, and normative benchmarks to assess progress across security, governance, and environmental dimensions.

Foster multi-level governance by enhancing coordination among EU institutions, member states, and regional actors. Establish dedicated inter-institutional units to harmonize project pipelines with overarching CFSP priorities, ensuring that regional initiatives contribute to conflict prevention and stability.

Encourage local ownership and capacity-building by investing in regional institutions and local actors. Joint training programs and technical assistance should be designed to strengthen governance, rule of law, and human rights in alignment with CFSP objectives.

Implement conditional participation frameworks that reinforce adherence to EU norms. This approach can create incentives for partner countries to align their policies with EU values while providing tangible benefits on the ground.

Facilitate cross-regional learning by sharing best practices in governance, rule of law, and socio-economic development among partner states. This can enhance the overall effectiveness of EU interventions and strengthen the EU's credibility as a coherent actor.

Enhance public communication strategies to build legitimacy and awareness of EU engagement. Making local populations and regional stakeholders aware of the tangible benefits of EU cooperation can foster support for governance initiatives.

Conduct a policy review of the workings of the sub-regionals and the EU's crisis management in the context of a further strengthening of governance of the EU's Enlargement Strategy

By adopting these policy recommendations, the EU can strengthen its regional cooperation efforts, ensuring they are impactful, coherent, and aligned with CFSP objectives and values.

To ensure the European Union maximizes its influence, stability, and cohesion across its neighborhood, policymakers and stakeholders must act decisively to implement the proposed strategy and establish the dedicated office for subregional affairs. The benefits of a coordinated and professionalized approach—enhanced regional stability, strengthened resilience, deeper integration, and increased credibility—cannot be realized without immediate commitment and resource allocation. It is imperative that decision-makers prioritize the policy recommendations outlined herein, committing the necessary political will, financial support, and institutional attention to operationalize the strategy effectively. By doing so, the EU can transform its engagement with subregions from a fragmented set of initiatives into a coherent, impactful framework that safeguards shared interests, fosters long-term prosperity, and strengthens Europe's standing as a reliable partner. Failure to act risks leaving critical subregional opportunities underutilized and may weaken the EU's capacity to respond to emerging security, economic, and environmental challenges. The time for decisive, coordinated action is now: the EU's future stability and influence depend on it.

Perspective

The evolution of EU political guidelines on regional cooperation reflects a significant shift from ad hoc engagement to a more strategic and harmonized approach. This transformation is driven by the need to address complex geopolitical challenges, enhance regional stability, and promote shared values across diverse subregions.

From the early 1990s, the EU's focus was primarily on crisis response and stabilization efforts, often characterized by fragmented initiatives that lacked coherence. As the geopolitical landscape evolved, the EU recognized the importance of integrating normative objectives with operational delivery. This realization has led to the establishment of multi-year strategies and macro-regional frameworks that align regional activities with broader Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) objectives.

A critical perspective on this evolution emphasizes the necessity of embedding systematic evaluation mechanisms within the policy cycle. The concept of epikrisis, or systematic comparison and evaluation, has become central to assessing the impact of regional initiatives. By applying standardized Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) across different subregions, the EU can identify gaps, reinforce

strategic coherence, and ensure that its interventions produce measurable outcomes.

Moreover, the integration of local ownership and capacity-building into regional cooperation efforts is essential. Engaging local actors and investing in regional institutions not only enhances the sustainability of initiatives but also fosters a sense of ownership among communities. This approach aligns with the EU's commitment to promoting human rights, rule of law, and democratic governance.

However, challenges remain. The dispersion of responsibilities across multiple EU institutions and funding streams can limit strategic coherence and weaken normative alignment. To address these structural gaps, the establishment of a dedicated EU office for subregional cooperation within the EEAS is recommended. This office would consolidate institutional knowledge, harmonize objectives, and ensure that purposeful activities are deliberately linked to CFSP priorities.

In conclusion, the perspective on the evolution of EU political guidelines underscores the importance of a strategic, integrated approach to regional cooperation. By systematically evaluating initiatives, fostering local ownership, and addressing structural challenges, the EU can enhance its effectiveness in promoting stability, resilience, and shared values across its neighboring regions.

Ultimately, the study invites contemplation on the delicate balance of control and power in our societies. History and contemporary experience alike show that when authority is exercised in excess, it can become self-defeating, undermining the very political communities it seeks to govern and harming humanity at large. Instances of professional incompetence, institutional racism, and flawed leadership often conspire to produce outcomes that are the opposite of those intended, revealing how systems designed to organize and protect can instead perpetuate injustice and dysfunction. These patterns serve as a sober reminder of human fallibility: that ambition and authority, untempered by humility, accountability, and ethical reflection, risk corroding both social cohesion and our shared moral compass. In this light, the study underscores a fundamental lesson about man—his capacity for both creation and destruction, and the enduring necessity of vigilance, integrity, and restraint in the exercise of power.

Hear me, fellow observers of Europe's destiny! Consider the Union not merely as a collection of states, but as a living polity, striving to safeguard its liberty, integrity, and influence. How, I ask, can we ensure that the myriad strands of our European architecture—subregional cooperation, crisis management, the European Security and Defence Policy, and the noble enterprise of enlargement—do not merely exist side by side, but **intertwine in strength**, each reinforcing the other, each magnifying the effect of the whole?

First, let us regard the **subregional initiatives**: those endeavors where nations unite by geography, history, or circumstance, to address common threats and cultivate shared resilience. Alone, they are potent; together, they must become conduits, channels through which local knowledge, operational experience, and political will flow upwards into the broader Union. Without careful design, they remain isolated currents; with deliberate integration, they feed the river of EU-wide strategy, shaping and being shaped by the continental currents.

Next, consider the **EU crisis management concepts**, the doctrines, plans, and rapid response mechanisms devised to confront emergencies, whether of conflict, sabotage, or hybrid interference. These concepts derive their legitimacy and effectiveness not in abstraction, but in their capacity to absorb the intelligence, foresight, and lessons of subregional efforts. Here, mutual reinforcement arises: subregional vigilance informs EU planning, EU frameworks provide resources and legitimacy to local actors, and together, they form a lattice of preparedness that is both deep and resilient.

Turn, then, to the **European Security and Defence Policy**—a policy not of rhetoric, but of arms, of strategy, of coordinated action. Its force multiplies when it aligns with subregional networks, when crisis management doctrines are codified into operational readiness, and when the lessons of enlargement—the extension of Union norms, of law, of institutions—are woven into its fabric. Each enlargement, each new member, is not merely a gain in territory, but an opportunity to **interlock capacities, share intelligence, and unify standards**, ensuring that Europe's shield is not fractured by diversity but strengthened by it.

And finally, speak of **enlargement**, that most audacious of projects, the spread of European norms, stability, and resilience into new lands. Enlargement alone is fragile; it requires the reinforcing embrace of crisis management, the operational discipline of the ESDP, and the experiential wisdom of subregional cooperation. Yet, when fully integrated, it multiplies the Union's capacity: new members bring local insight, new legitimacy, and new operational networks that interweave with existing instruments, producing effects no single component could achieve alone.

Thus, the principle is clear, as it would have been clear to the ancients: **mutual reinforcement and interlocking effects are ensured by deliberate coordination, constant communication, and nested integration**. Subregional networks feed the EU's strategic planning; EU doctrines codify and resource these networks; the ESDP operationalizes them; enlargement expands them; and at every stage, intelligence flows freely, lessons are captured, and capabilities are shared. Only through such recursive alignment can Europe achieve a polity in which each initiative is strengthened by the other, and the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

Let us, then, design not isolated mechanisms, but a **harmonious architecture**, in which vigilance, doctrine, force, and extension resonate in unison, producing resilience, deterrence, and the enduring security of the

Union.

And fear not: We are building a state in Europe.

Appendix 1 – The UFM - From Intergovernmental Organisation to Regional Organisation

By 2030, the anticipated transformation of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) from an intergovernmental organization into a more formalized subregional body within the EU framework raises profound questions concerning governance, policy coherence, and regional integration. It prompts reflection on how member states will reconcile national sovereignty with deeper levels of supranational coordination, particularly when EU norms intersect with domestic priorities. Questions also emerge around institutional design and legitimacy, including the architecture needed for decision-making, dispute resolution, and implementation among a diverse set of Mediterranean states. The transformation will require harmonization of economic, environmental, migration, security, and energy policies across countries with widely differing development levels and strategic interests, while ensuring alignment with broader EU strategies without duplicating existing mechanisms. Geopolitical implications are significant, affecting relationships with external actors such as Russia, Turkey, the US, and North African states, as well as the management of persistent conflicts, migration pressures, and maritime security challenges. Additionally, the shift raises concerns about economic development and trade facilitation, financial sustainability, cultural and social integration, and the EU's strategic autonomy in the face of competing regional and global influences. Ultimately, the UfM's subregional evolution will require innovative institutional designs, coordinated policy frameworks, and robust mechanisms for legitimacy, accountability, and inclusive participation.

By 2030, the transformation of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) into a subregional body within the EU presents challenges that can be addressed proactively through forward-looking strategies. Member states can reconcile national sovereignty with supranational coordination by adopting flexible governance frameworks that allow joint decision-making while preserving essential domestic autonomy. Institutional design and legitimacy can be strengthened through inclusive representation mechanisms, transparent procedures, and rotating leadership roles that ensure all countries have a stake in decision-making. Policy coherence across economic, environmental, migration, security, and energy domains can be achieved by establishing thematic clusters, shared data platforms, and coordinated investment strategies that align national priorities with regional objectives. Geopolitical tensions can be mitigated by developing structured dialogue channels with external actors, fostering confidence-building measures, and integrating the UfM into broader EU foreign and security strategies. Economic disparities can be addressed through targeted cross-border infrastructure projects, regional investment funds, and trade facilitation mechanisms designed to stimulate inclusive growth. Cultural and social integration can be advanced via language programs, educational exchanges, and civil society partnerships that promote shared Mediterranean identity and participation. Financial sustainability can be ensured by leveraging EU instruments, national contributions, and international partnerships with transparent budgeting and results-based monitoring. Finally, the UfM can enhance EU strategic autonomy by serving as a platform for coordinated Mediterranean action, providing a resilient regional framework capable of responding to crises and shaping long-term development agendas.

Any attempt to imagine the Union for the Mediterranean—or any analogous Mediterranean framework—as a future regional organisation must begin with a clear understanding of its present institutional profile. The UfM today functions primarily as an intergovernmental cooperation platform whose activities are driven by projects rather than rules. Its legal personality is limited, its authority is dependent on the voluntary consent of member states, and it lacks both supranational powers and any mechanism for hierarchical enforcement. Describing the UfM as a corporate security regime highlights these attributes: it relies on functional, project-based cooperation, uses technical rather than political integration logics, and frames security in socio-economic rather than military terms. Security, in this sense, is generated through infrastructure, energy connectivity, migration management, and environmental resilience rather than through classic hard-security commitments. The theoretical question is therefore how such a loose, technocratic, functionalist regime could gradually accumulate the characteristics traditionally associated with a regional organisation.

The first dimension of this transformation concerns legal personality and constitutional foundations. A genuine regional organisation cannot subsist without a constitutive treaty that clearly codifies its membership criteria, institutional competences, decision-making procedures, financial mechanisms, and arrangements for dispute settlement. The Mediterranean context demands no less. A founding Mediterranean Charter would provide the legal infrastructure within which the organisation can act, define its purposes, and bind its members. At present, the UfM possesses a partial legal personality, but not one recognised as binding in the sense required for an autonomous subject of international law. A regional organisation must be capable of concluding treaties, contracting personnel, holding assets, and acting credibly in international fora. These capacities can emerge only when member states explicitly confer them.

Once the legal and constitutional foundations are established, institutional deepening becomes indispensable. A regional organisation requires standing political bodies capable of adopting decisions that are not merely advisory but binding within well-defined domains.

This necessitates the creation or transformation of a Council of Ministers equipped with formal decision-making authority. It also requires an executive secretariat that moves beyond coordinative tasks and is endowed with a mandate to administer programmes, oversee implementation, and exercise limited autonomous authority. Depending on political feasibility, a consultative parliamentary assembly could serve as a forum for deliberation and regional identity-building. Sectoral committees in areas such as energy, migration, transport, and environmental management would anchor the organisation's work in specialised expertise. While the Mediterranean does not need a supranational structure modelled on the European Commission, it does require a secretariat capable of shaping agendas, monitoring compliance, and exercising delegated powers without dependence on constant intergovernmental prompting.

Building these bodies would require the simultaneous expansion and clarification of competences. At the heart of any regional organisation lies a set of shared or harmonised policy domains. For the Mediterranean, these would likely include maritime and border management, energy and climate governance, regional infrastructure connectivity, trade facilitation, and migration cooperation. The depth of these competences need not mirror the European Union, but they must be codified, predictable, and embedded in legal and administrative routines. Without such codification, cooperation remains episodic and vulnerable to political shocks.

A further step is the establishment of resource autonomy. Regional organisations require budgets that are not ad-hoc or externally controlled. Even a modest budget funded through agreed contribution formulas allows for institutional continuity and the independent financing of regional programmes. It also reduces the risk that the Mediterranean organisation becomes merely an implementation arm for European Union external funding. While the UfM has experience in coordinating external financing through development banks and EU mechanisms, it lacks its own pool of financial instruments; the emergence of such instruments would mark a decisive shift toward organisational autonomy.

A New Headquarters for the Union for the Mediterranean has been offered by the Spanish government, and is under construction given the need for a considerable strengthening of governance we propose is organized around partnerships and sub regional verticals as well as alliances with international financial organisations and international financial institutions to the extent they are not handled by the fused DG MENA and DG ELARG-ENP.

Equally vital is the cultivation of a security community logic. A corporate security regime treats security as an externality managed through technical projects; a regional organisation recognises that certain vulnerabilities—maritime risks, environmental threats, migration pressures, climate shocks, or energy disruptions—are inherently shared. This recognition is the seed of a regional security community. Such a transformation does not require NATO-style commitments. The much lighter model of ASEAN's political-security community offers a more plausible analogue: shared guidelines, confidence-building measures, coordinated crisis responses, periodic joint exercises, and mechanisms for early warning and risk monitoring. These measures would help generate the trust, predictability, and habits of cooperation essential to a Mediterranean institutional order.

Political conditions form another indispensable layer. No regional organisation emerges without a stable leadership core, a minimal collective identity, and a readiness among states to accept limited institutional constraint. The Mediterranean region is particularly fragmented: geopolitical rivalries, the Arab–Israeli conflict, economic asymmetries between north and south, and the dominance of EU members create formidable obstacles. Overcoming them requires confidence-building measures among Southern Mediterranean states, reassurances that EU members will not dominate institutional outcomes, and voting systems or representational arrangements that balance asymmetries. Political will is indispensable; even the most sophisticated institutional design fails without it.

We emphasise the preservation both of the all-EU network and the "Club Med" subregional framework while maintaining Europe's cradle of integration, the approach should combine **multi-layered governance, strategic coordination, and inclusive policy communities**. The all-EU networks such as EuroMesco can be reinforced by ensuring that EU-wide policies, funding instruments, and institutional platforms remain accessible and binding, creating coherence across all member states. Simultaneously, the Club Med network—covering Mediterranean EU members and neighboring states—can operate as a complementary subregional forum, focused on issues of shared interest such as maritime security, energy transition, migration management, and cultural cooperation. To bridge these layers, mechanisms for **policy alignment, cross-network dialogue, and joint project management** are essential, ensuring that subregional initiatives feed into EU-wide priorities rather than fragment them. Preserving this dual structure requires actively fostering a **policy community** that encompasses technical experts, political actors, and civil society from both networks, promoting shared norms, joint learning, and a sense of collective ownership over Mediterranean Europe's development. By treating the Mediterranean as both a laboratory for subregional experimentation and a pillar of EU cohesion, Europe can sustain a flexible, integrated system that balances innovation, solidarity, and strategic unity.

The Mediterranean is the cradle of Europe's civilization, and its administration, stability, and prosperity directly affect the wider continent in multiple interconnected ways and help us remember who we are and how the world made Europe, or Europe the world. Economically, the region serves as a critical hub for trade, energy transit, and tourism, so instability or poor governance can disrupt supply chains, raise costs, and undermine investment across Europe. Politically, Mediterranean fragility can generate migration pressures, security challenges, and transnational conflicts that demand EU attention and resources. Environmentally, the region's vulnerability to climate change, water scarcity, and biodiversity loss has cross-border implications, affecting Europe's food security, energy systems, and ecological resilience. Culturally and socially, the Mediterranean embodies Europe's historical and intellectual heritage; fostering education, cultural exchange, and social cohesion there strengthens the shared European identity. Strategically, a stable and prosperous Mediterranean reinforces Europe's capacity to act as a unified actor on the global stage, enhancing geopolitical influence, regional partnerships, and crisis response. In short, Europe's well-being is intimately tied to the Mediterranean: its governance, stability, and prosperity are not peripheral concerns but central to Europe's security, economy, environment, and identity.

In practice, the transition toward a regional organisation would proceed through a stepwise pathway. A Mediterranean Charter would first articulate legal personality and institutional purpose. The UfM Secretariat would be transformed into an executive body with sector-specific portfolios. The Council of the Mediterranean would replace or coexist with current ministerial meetings but would possess formal decision-making competence. A lightweight dispute-settlement mechanism—perhaps modelled on ASEAN's flexible approach—would provide a means for managing disagreements. A financing instrument, even initially modest, would give the organisation tangible agency. Over time, member states would adopt binding regional rules in priority areas such as maritime rescue, energy interconnections, disaster management, or technical standards. Functional cooperation would gradually crystallise into normative consolidation, which, in turn, would generate political regionalism.

In essence, the evolution of a Mediterranean union from a corporate security regime into a regional organisation involves a comprehensive transformation: the shift from project-based, technocratic coordination to treaty-based governance; from episodic cooperation to the rule-based production of common norms; from donor-dependent financing to autonomous resources; and from a loose platform to an institution capable of adopting and enforcing regional decisions. Such an organisation would maintain minimal supranational authority but possess enough institutional density to shape behaviour, guide expectations, and define a shared Mediterranean regulatory space.

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