

Learning by doing: military lessons learnt within the comprehensive approach

Conference Report

The past decade – with the launch of 30 military operations and civilian missions under the EU CSDP – offers ample scope for drawing lessons and implementing solutions when it comes to the comprehensive approach and the alignment of various tools. These lessons fall into several categories: strategic, operational, and relational – meaning those related to cooperation with others in the field and beyond.

In essence, the comprehensive approach aims to bring together instruments, organisations and processes at an EU as well as member-state level. The aim is to add value and increase efficiency when implementing the EU's external action – by both creating a more focussed mindset and giving a sense of direction to the EU's coming of age as a political and security actor.

The contemporary security environment requires both 'hard' and 'soft' power tools, both civilian and military contributions. The military represents one of several instruments at the EU's disposal – and under specific circumstances can provide invaluable input to peacebuilding. While its contributions to the comprehensive approach are clearly defined, the civilian side is more complex as it consists of multiple actors at various stages of preparedness.

From a strategic and institutional viewpoint, the financing mechanisms, the synchronising of national strategies and CSDP operations, and a sense of strategic direction act as enablers for a more effective military contribution to the comprehensive approach. This has clear implications for force generation and the development of future capabilities – but affects CSDP operations in the planning and execution stage as well (see [Expert discussion #1](#)).

The impact and effectiveness of CSDP and, by extension, the comprehensive approach can be seen in the field, first and foremost, through the operational contributions of individual missions. Here, mission experience shows that strategic guidance and the engagement and investment in the comprehensive approach on the part of the implementing actors are key challenges for maximising operational impact (see [Expert discussion #2](#)).

From an operational lessons learnt perspective, a joint understanding of what is meant by the comprehensive approach, but also existing and functioning coordination mechanisms between civilian and military instruments constitute important aspects: and to get there, regular dialogue as well as coordination and training are necessary (see [Expert discussion #3](#)).

There are a number of lessons to be drawn from the experience of the past decade – which in turn raises not only questions surrounding how to assess the impact of CSDP, but also of how a lessons learnt process can/should be established. Although a sensitive issue, it remains indispensable to improve the effectiveness of missions and allow them to make a difference.

Perhaps most importantly, active learning and implementation of these lessons require leadership – and the establishment of a lessons learnt culture that relies on a system of standardisation, objectivity, and senior leadership.