Militarism in the European Union
An update for the European Council
25-26 June 2015

In brief

The European Union was founded as a peace project, but today elements of EU security policy are a danger to its own people. Few citizens are aware of the policies their governments champion at the EU level. Since 2013, EU policy has increasingly supported the arms trade, the perpetuation of militarism with countries affected by war, the development of armed drones, and the militarisation of cyberspace. The EU should make a strategic shift away from the failed policies of militarism.

On 25-26 June 2015, EU Member State heads of government will review the EU's progress on security and issues such as arms trade. It could be a stimulus to your action to engage with your head of government. QCEA's website, publications and blog provide more information about the aspects of EU militarism covered in this background paper and the non-violent peacebuilding alternatives that would build a safer world.

The EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)

The European Union's (EU) functions and decision-making processes are set out in treaties agreed by all of the EU's Member States. The most recent constitutional treaty, agreed in Lisbon in 2009, maintained the dominant role of Member State national governments in EU external policy, although it also gave some additional scrutiny and funding powers to the European Parliament.

For the most part, European citizens are unaware that the EU has its own security and defence policy. Under what is known as the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the EU is active in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. The wide range of CSDP activities include unarmed monitoring of ceasefire lines, police and judicial reform, military training, and even military operations (such as the EU naval mission around the Somali coast). A small proportion of EU funding enables local non-governmental organisations to undertake grass-roots peacebuilding in an effort to prevent conflict.

Four of the twenty-eight leaders attending the European Council (CC: P. Shaw, Crown Copyright, 2014).

The growth of EU militarism since 2013

In December 2013, the European Council (heads of 28 Member State governments) met to agree the priorities for the EU CSDP. You might be surprised to discover what they are.

EU Common Security and Defence priorities agreed in December 2013:

- Development of armed drones, by the EU's own defence agency
- Economic support for the arms trade
- Air-to-air refuelling to support aerial bombing
- Military responses to attacks on cyber and maritime infrastructure

Top: Eurosatory arms fair in Paris (CC: AMB Brescva).
Bottom: EU Training Mission in Mali (Defence Images, Crown Copyright, 2014).

Economic support for the arms trade

EU Member States produce arms, such as submarines built in Germany, handguns from Belgium, and fighter planes from the United Kingdom. Like many industries, profit relies on export. European-made weapons have been used recently against civilian populations in the Middle East and North Africa, for example during the political unrest since 2011, and also further afield, such as in Sri Lanka and Colombia.

In December 2013, the European Council agreed measures to help to expand their arms industries, including ensuring the development of skills needed for the arms industry. The written conclusions from the meeting predicted that this would "bring benefits in terms of growth, jobs and innovation to the broader European industrial sector". This argument is familiar: it is often made by arms trade lobbyists. Prioritising jobs and growth over human well-being repeats the economic mistakes of the past. Focussing only on jobs, as if arms manufacture is an industry like any other and not one that creates tools of violence, is inconsistent with the notion of the EU as a peace project.

Military support for conflict-affected countries

Since the first EU civilian police operation in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2002, thirty EU missions have been launched in conflict-affected countries. Some are civilian in nature, but others are military missions. For example, military training missions began in Somalia in 2010 and in Mali in 2013. These missions have a stated purpose of strengthening the capacity of third governments to fight organised crime and terrorism, as well as contributing to a more secure energy supply for Europe. This includes providing training and equipment.

In conflict-affected countries, it can be hard to predict what actions military forces may take.

The violence is often not amenable to civilian control, and soldiers may exhibit a limited appreciation of human rights. Where the EU helps to increase military capabilities, it may also increase the harm these military groups can cause. The almost complete exclusion of women from EU operations reinforces gender roles that associate masculinity with power, violence, and control. Instead, the EU should focus on preventing conflict through peacebuilding. It can do this by prioritising investment toward mechanisms for dialogue and civil peace services, as well as by promoting equality and effective government.

Armed drones

In December 2013 the heads of government publicly welcomed EU collaboration on the development of drones for military use. A drone is a remote-controlled flying robot.

While drones can be used for various purposes — surveillance, for example — they are increasingly being used to carry and fire weapons (missiles and bombs). Currently the main users of armed drones are the governments of the US, the UK, and Israel. However, this technology is proliferating, and over the next few years many more governments are likely to acquire it. The EU is playing a part in this proliferation process, as there are two EU bodies that, for more than a decade, have been actively promoting the development of drones as a military technology. One of these bodies is the European Commission, which has been using EU research grants to fund arms manufacturers' drone development projects. The other is the European Defence Agency, a lesser-known EU body that was established to encourage military cooperation within the EU.

Armed drones raise serious concerns, which have been pointed out by non-governmental organisations including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. A government with armed drones can launch aerial attacks without risking lives on its own side. An armed drone flying over Iraq, for example, may be under the control of an operator sitting in front of a computer screen in an air base in the UK. This lack of risk makes resorting to violence easier, and therefore more attractive to governments.

With killing having become so easy, there is an alarming tendency for armed-drone-using governments to disregard the rules of international law that are intended to limit the violence of war.

The US government, in particular, uses armed drones to assassinate suspected Islamist militants outside war zones — in clear violation of international law. Moreover, drone operators depend on intelligence to tell them where to fire their weapons, and this intelligence is often incomplete or inaccurate — resulting in a large number of civilian casualties. All of this has led experts in human rights law to conclude that armed drones are a serious threat to the most fundamental of all human rights: the right to life.

In December 2013 the heads of government expressed unreserved support for the development of drones as a military technology, and there was no mention of human rights concerns. However, since December 2013 three major transnational institutions have voted to recognise these concerns as valid: the European Parliament in February 2014, the United Nations Human Rights Council in March 2014, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in April 2015. (The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is a body consisting of representatives of the national parliaments of forty-seven European countries.)

With EU defence and security policy coming up for review at the June 2015 European Council, our national leaders have another opportunity to discuss where they stand on the issue of armed drones. Will they ignore the concerns of the defenders of human rights? Or will they adopt a new, human-rights-centred approach?

Drone at the Paris Airshow (Creative Commons: Guerric)

Militarised cyberspace

The EU has recognised an increasing risk of malicious attacks on computer information systems that are central to many public and private services. Cyber-attacks can be started from anywhere in the world through the internet. EU policy-makers are currently exploring militaristic responses to these threats, rather than taking steps to build a peaceful cyberspace.

In December 2013, EU Heads of Government requested an EU Cyber Defence Policy Framework. This has now been agreed: it outlines that protection from cyber-attacks is considered a military responsibility, and it promises that military-style cyber capabilities will be developed and made available to EU Member States.

The aims of this new EU framework are to strengthen the European arms trade (specifically the European defence technological and industrial base) and to align EU action with NATO's so-called 'cyber-defence' activity.

This approach is an example of the 'Fortress Europe' approach being taken by the EU on issues ranging from migration to countering violent extremism. As an alternative, the EU should be developing international structures that would provide timely and accurate information in the event of a cyber-attack. This will reduce the risk of panic and escalation of conflict through retaliatory action. It will also provide an investigative capability that can support international legal redress.

Recommendations

1. Re-focus from militarism to peacebuilding

QCEA calls on EU Member States to make a strategic shift away from the failed policies of militarism toward finding peaceful solutions. Resources should be refocused toward addressing the roots causes of conflict, including through mediation, support for local civil society and civil peace services. Arms export should not be promoted, and especially not solely for reasons of economic growth.

2. Acknowledge that drones violate human rights

QCEA calls on heads of government meeting as the European Council to acknowledge the human rights impacts and potential impacts of armed drones. In the future we hope that Member States will commit to not develop or use armed drones.

What can YOU do?

The European Council is a meeting of the heads of the governments of each country. To influence the decisions taken at the European Council meeting on 25-26 June 2015, contact the minister in your country's government who has responsibility for European affairs. You could write a letter and it may also be possible to use other forms of communication, such as email or social media. The contact details for the appropriate ministers in all twenty-eight EU Member States are available online at <http://bit.ly/1H3o87p>. (If you are not a citizen or resident of an EU Member State, then we would advise you to contact the Latvian minister, as Latvia currently holds the Council presidency, and so has a special role in organising the June meeting.)

QCEA encourages you to advocate for peacebuilding in place of military solutions. In particular, your letter (or email, etc.) could call on the European Council to address the human rights concerns regarding the development of armed drones. It would be worth pointing out that the European Parliament, the United Nations Human Rights Council, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe have all acknowledged that armed drones raise serious human rights concerns.

If we all work on this together, we can make a difference.