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EXPLORING THE EU'S POLYHEDRAL PEACE MEDIATION IN ETHIOPIA AND SUDAN: Can the EU be a suitable peacemaker?

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Abstract: This paper examines EU engagement in peace mediation in sub-Saharan Africa, and specifically in Ethiopia's Tigray war and the conflict in Sudan. It uses the analytical framework of "multi-mediation" to map, classify and analyse the mediation-related initiatives carried out by the EU. The ultimate goal is to defend the use of peace mediation as a cost-efficient and less coercive foreign policy tool, well-suited to safeguarding the EU's peace and security interests in the African continent. The conclusion presents three main points: a) the EU is well-equipped to engage in mediation and be considered a "multi-mediator"; b) the EU has structural limitations which prevent it from fully mobilising these capacities and from leading mediation efforts; c) the EU is uniquely well-placed to leverage its resources and support mediation through a nuanced normative approach that can positively impact peace processes.

Keywords: EU, Ethiopia, Tigray, Sudan, mediation, normative approach, foreign policy

INTRODUCTION

“For us, the European Union, you are more than just a neighbour. Both our unions are built on a dream – a dream of peace.”

Six days after assuming her new post, Ursula von der Leyen uttered this phrase at the headquarters of the African Union (AU), in what it was her first official trip as President of the European Commission (EC) (Herszenhorn, 2019). Two weeks earlier, on November 27th, 2019, when presenting her College of Commissioners at the European Parliament, she had outlined her vision to implement what she called the “geopolitical Commission” (European Commission, 2019). With it she expressed her ambition to consolidate the EU as an international, assertive and pragmatic actor operating in the “high politics” domain to advance its strategic interests in the world (Blockmans, 2020). Within this agenda, EU-Africa relations occupy a central place. This was illustrated by Von der Leyen’s first trip abroad or by the Mission Letter given to Jutta Urpilainen, Commissioner for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), in which the first objective was to design a new “comprehensive strategy with Africa” (Von der Leyen, 2019: 4). This request was later met with the Comprehensive Strategy presented by the EC and the High Representative (HRVP) in March 2020. This document underlined peace and security as one of the top five cooperation areas (European Commission, 2020a).

Peace and security have been a major priority of EU-AU relations since the partnership was enshrined in 2007 with the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (Council of the European Union, 2007: 5). The reason for this is the EU perception that to safeguard its internal security it is necessary to stabilise its neighbours and avoid damaging spillover effects. While the EU tool to ensure peace on its eastern borders has been the enlargement process, the EU-Africa partnership was the framework to address the security concerns (among others) in the EU’s southern neighbourhood and its surroundings. Furthermore, the conflict management aspect has gained importance within the EU approach to Africa as it is seen as a prerequisite for achieving its other interests there, such as migration reduction or trade and economic relations. For this reason, it is no surprise that the new commission, which has a clear geopolitical ambition, considers the African continent and its security as a strategic priority for the EU.

Since 2007, the EU has been investing heavily in stabilisation efforts in the African continent. Nevertheless, until now most of the resources have been concentrated in police, military and defence initiatives, such as the deployment of Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operations or the support for Peace and Support Operations (PSOs)

led by the AU and the subsequent Regional Mechanisms.¹ This is concerning, taking into account that this approach is financially very costly, politically risky and, considering its results, ineffective in achieving stability (Tull, 2022; Van der Lijn et al., 2022; Herrberg, 2021). As a result, other conflict prevention and resolution instruments which could be useful have been overlooked. Among them, peace mediation is a cost-effective, less coercive and less interventionist tool which seems to be underexploited (International Crisis Group, 2021: 2). This unequal balance raises questions about the adequacy and effectiveness of the EU approach to peace and security in the African continent, and questions whether the EU is fully leveraging the potential of its tools and institutions.

To address this conundrum, this research will investigate and analyse EU engagement in peace mediation in sub-Saharan Africa during the last Von der Leyen commission. The goal is to comprehend if and how the EU, under this new “geopolitical Commission”, has been turning to conflict mediation by looking into the nature, level and magnitude of the EU’s engagement, and to identify its strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for improvement. More widely, this research aims to better understand if the EU exploits mediation’s full potential to advance its peace and security interests in the

African continent. For this purpose, the research question is: How has the EU engaged in conflict mediation in sub-Saharan Africa during the Von der Leyen commission?

To empirically address this question, this research uses two case studies: the Ethiopia-Tigray war (2020-2022) and the current conflict in Sudan (April 2023-present). These cases have been selected

because: they occur within the selected time frame; happen in a geographical area of strategic significance for the EU; are categorised by their high intensity in terms of violence and humanitarian impact; and have involved multiple foreign actors and mediation processes. The data on the EU engagement in peace mediation in these two case studies has been collected through two qualitative methods. Document analysis has been used to identify the multiple EU engagements and to capture the public and official EU position. To complement the gaps in the publicly available information and to obtain deeper analysis about the EU’s actions, 11 semi-structured interviews with experts and decision-makers have been conducted.

There is a wide literature on EU security and peace efforts in the African continent, which generally depicts the EU as an actor focused on conflict management and stabilisation through the provision of security assistance (Lavallée & Volkel, 2015;

Peace and security have been a major priority of EU-AU relations since the partnership was enshrined in 2007 with the Joint Africa-EU Strategy. The reason for this is the EU perception that to safeguard its internal security it is necessary to stabilise its neighbours and avoid damaging spillover effects.

1. €2.9bn spent through the African Peace Facility from 2004 to 2019, from which 93% has been on Peace and Support Operations and Crisis Management (International Crisis Group, 2021a: 2).

Olsen, 2009; Gegout, 2009; Raineri & Strazzari 2019; Venturi, 2017). Nonetheless, the literature on EU foreign policy has not extensively covered the EU's role in mediation (Bergmann et al., 2018: 6-7), and EU mediation in sub-Saharan Africa specifically has received little attention. While EU mediation in the neighbourhood has received wider attention (International Negotiation, 2018; Bergmann, 2020a; Vukovic, 2020), only two papers on EU mediation in sub-Saharan Africa have been published (Müller & Bergmann, 2020; Davis, 2018). Given this, this paper provides three main contributions. First, it adds analysis to the scarce literature on EU mediation and specifically on the implementation of this practice in the African continent. This is done by comparing EU engagement in both case studies. Second, it delves into the institutional architecture of EU mediation and its capacities and makes two conclusions: one, the EU has the capacities to be considered a multi-mediator, meaning an actor capable of operating on different tracks, levels and stages of peace mediation processes; and two, the EU has structural limitations that prevent it from fully mobilising these capacities and leading mediation. Third, the article will also touch on the practical implications that normativity can have on the role of the EU as a mediator, which is a very novel topic in the literature (Vukovic, 2020; Nouwen, 2022; Caruso & Akamo, 2024).

EU FOREIGN POLICY AND MEDIATION

This section will briefly explain EU foreign policy, concentrating on the role of mediation. When the Maastricht Treaty was adopted in 1992, one of the preambular clauses announced the intention of creating a “common foreign and security policy... in order to promote peace, security and progress in Europe and in the World” (Treaty on European Union, 1992: 1). With the Maastricht Treaty, the EU expressed its ambitions to be an actor with a strong foreign policy capable of advancing its interests outside Europe, including among others peace and security. This aspiration would later be consolidated with the approval of the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS) and with the 2007 Lisbon Treaty that proclaimed in Article 2 “to promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples” (Treaty of Lisbon, 2007: 11). As such, from the 1990s the EU started to develop multiple institutions and strategies intended to realise this key foreign policy objective of promoting peace and security.

One of the ways to achieve this foreign policy goal is through mediation. There are multiple definitions of mediation, but the 2009 Concept on Strengthening EU Mediation and Dialogue Capacities describes it as “a way of assisting negotiations between conflict parties and transforming conflicts with the support of an acceptable third party” (Council of the European Union 2009: 2). The first time that the term “mediation” was explicitly mentioned as a possible tool to be used in EU foreign policy was in the Implementation Report

of the ESS approved by the council in 2008. The report issued a call “to expand dialogue and mediation capacities” and regarded them as instruments to advance the EU strategic objective of conflict prevention (Council of the European Union, General Secretariat of the Council, 2009: 21).

Even though “mediation” was not included in official EU strategic documents until 2008, several scholars have emphasised that this tool had begun to be used earlier, in the late 1990s, under the lead of High Representative Javier Solana. As Herrberg explains, Solana set the precedent of EU mediation capacity when, among others, he helped to negotiate the Ohrid Agreement in 2001 and mediated between Serbia and Montenegro in 2002 (Herrberg, 2021:135).

In 2009, the Council of the EU adopted a Concept for mediation and dialogue capacities that aimed to provide a “systematic approach” to mediation, which was recognised as an “effective and cost-efficient instrument for conflict prevention, transformation and resolution”.

After years of practice and in the context of an ambitious foreign policy, in November 2009 the council adopted the Concept on Strengthening EU Mediation and Dialogue Capacities. The aim of the concept was to provide a “systematic approach” to mediation which is recognised as an “effective and cost-

efficient instrument for conflict prevention, transformation and resolution” (Council of the European Union, 2009: 3). This document is important for three reasons. First, because it institutionalised the EU's ambition to use mediation as a foreign policy tool (Bergmann et al., 2018). Second, because it provided a much broader definition of mediation than the average definitions available in the literature on mediation (Bergmann et al., 2018; Haastrup et al., 2014). Haastrup et al. (2014: 3) believe that this was a deliberate choice with which the EU aimed to present a wide number of actions that could be conducted under the banner of “mediation”. This point is substantiated by the fact that the concept introduced five different types of mediation (lead or co-mediator, promoting, leveraging, supporting and funding) among which just one (to lead or co-mediate) implies being directly engaged in the process, while the others are about mediation support (Council of the European Union, 2009: 6). Third, because the EU justified its interests in mediating and capability to mediate by presenting itself as a normative actor² (Davis, 2014: 69; Nouwen, 2022), and established five guiding principles, which included acting in accordance with human rights and international humanitarian law (Council of the European Union, 2009: 6-8).

In June 2016, the council approved the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) that replaced the 2003 ESS as the new security and foreign policy guiding document. The EUGS advocated

2. There have been many definitions of what it means to be a “normative” actor on foreign policy in the field of international relations. For this reason, this research considers a normative actor to be an actor that pursues normative foreign policy goals, which were defined by Nathalie Tocci in 2007 as, “those [goals] which aim to shape the milieu by regulating it through international regimes, organisations and law” (Tocci, 2007: 4)

for a stronger foreign policy as it interlinked internal and external EU security. To this end, it introduced the Integrated Approach, which consisted of harmonising the use of all EU foreign policy instruments under the purpose of advancing its strategic interests. Mediation was presented as a tool to be used throughout the conflict cycle (from prevention to resolution) in conjunction with the whole foreign policy toolkit (European Union Global Strategy, 2016: 29-31). The Integrated Approach encouraged the use of mediation (Bergmann & Friesen, 2021) and provided it with further leverage, as under its implementation the EU could offer a wide range of instruments to incentivise peace agreements (development and economic aid), support them (capacity building provision) and sustain them (CSDP missions for post-conflict stabilisation).

As a result of the Integrated Approach and the lessons learnt since 2009, in December 2020 the council approved the new Concept on EU Peace Mediation, which cemented the conception of mediation as a strategic and foreign policy tool. The 2020 concept also fulfilled the EU's normative commitment by declaring itself to be a "value-based" actor aiming to promote its "foundational values" (Panchulidze & Bergmann, 2021: 2) and by including new "guiding principles" for its mediation efforts, such as inclusivity or promotion of gender equality. The 2020 concept proposed implementing a multi-track approach in conjunction with other actors such as partners or mediation NGOs (Herrberg, 2021) and introduced new actions that could be considered mediation, including: facilitating, accompanying, coordinating and supporting process outcome (Council of the European Union, 2020a:10-11).

EU mediation actors

One strength of the EU as a mediator is that it has multiple institutions and actors capable of undertaking complementary action. The front-line institutions in mediation are the EU Special Representatives (EUSRs) (Interview I.11). According to their mandate, their tasks can include "negotiation... mediation and/or support to mediation" (Council of the European Union, 2009: 5). Other key actors are EU Delegations, Special Envoys (nominated for ad hoc cases and can include politicians from member states), HRVPs and even the member states (MSs) themselves after being delegated by the council (European Union Global Strategy, 2016). Furthermore, in some circumstances, the CSDP missions or the EC can also be involved in mediation on very specific issues such as security arrangements (Davis, 2014). At the coordination level there is the European External Action Service and its Mediation Support Unit that provides mediation capacity building to EU institutions, member states and even external partners (Interview I.11; Herrberg, 2021). Another category of relevant actors are the mediation NGOs, which receive funding from the EU and on several occasions have acted in coordination with it. (Interview I.1, I.8 and I.11; Herrberg, 2021).

THE EU AS A MEDIATOR

In this section I will briefly explain how the literature has been perceiving, portraying and approaching the EU as a mediator. One of the first papers on the topic was from Susanne Gentz, who in 2007 illustrated that before the Concepts were developed, the EU addressed conflict prevention and resolution through the use of political dialogue and exercised leverage through the conditionality implied in its financial and development programmes. Since then, academics and mediation NGOs have conducted further research on the topic. Still, some authors argue that there has been insufficient study of the possible modalities and impacts of EU mediation (Bergmann et al., 2018; Herrberg, 2021).

An important part of the literature has evaluated the impact and effectiveness of EU mediation. Herrberg (Herrberg, 2018) and Bergmann have developed the two main analytical frameworks. They devised two separate frameworks for mediation (Bergmann, 2020b) and mediation support (Müller & Bergmann, 2020). Another aspect that has been addressed by the literature, and which I will investigate with this article, concerns the type of engagement that characterises EU mediation. A point shared by multiple authors is that EU mediation can take multiple forms, or as Herrberg put it, can be "at the table" (leading, co-leading or mediating), "around the table" (mediation support) and/or "beyond the table" (sustaining the process) (2021:

EU mediation can take multiple forms: it can be "at the table" (leading, co-leading or mediating), "around the table" (offering mediation support) and/or "beyond the table" (sustaining the process).

139). Laura Davis in her 2014 book was a forerunner of the concept of "multi-mediator" (2014: 196). She used the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo to demonstrate the EU's ability to operate via a multi-layered, multi-dynamic, multilateral and multi-track approach (2014). Sheriff and Hauck presented an analytical compilation of multiple EU mediation cases in which they illustrated that their success depended on the EU's capacity to exploit and leverage its specific comparative advantages in every conflict (2013).

Another angle is the normativity of EU mediation. Nouwen explains that the normative character of the 2009 and 2020 concepts, together with the Eurocentrism and lack of self-reflexion ingrained in them, represent a baggage that can prevent the EU from understanding and exploiting its real added value and leverage (2022). Some scholars argue that the normative agenda can limit EU mediation's reach (Haastrup et al. 2014; Peral, 2012), and Caruso and Akamo illustrate how this dilemma materialised in the Ethiopia-Tigray war (2024). Against these points, Davies expounded that the EU's capacity to put forward a normative agenda depends on establishing clear and commonly agreed guidelines and limits on it (2014), and in this vein Bergmann and Friesen proposed a "strategic framework of overarching normative principles" (2021: 6).

Finally, another often overlooked component is the interaction between the EU and independent mediation NGOs. Several scholars have highlighted how the EU has frequently used

mediation NGOs to expand its reach (Haastrup et al., 2014), and how these organisations have granted it access to the grassroots (Davis, 2014) and contexts in which the EU is not institutionally welcomed (Sheriff & Hauck, 2013). Herrberg went further and endorsed NGOs as an answer to the EU's recurrent lack of flexibility and continuity, internal divisions, complex decision-making and bureaucratic constraints (2012).

THE EU-AFRICA PARTNERSHIP

This section provides the context for the case studies and introduces EU-Africa relations and the EU approach to the Horn. EU interests in the African continent are longstanding and peace and security comprise one of the major priorities. The 2016 EUGS is a good reflection of this, as it directly links EU security to stability in the African continent, and calls for diplomacy, CSDP and development funds to step up conflict prevention and resolution in the continent (European Union Global Strategy, 2016: 36).

From the end of the Second World War until the 2000s, relations between the EU and the African countries were characterised by their asymmetry and consisted of economic cooperation based on the EU-African Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries format. This dynamic started to change with the Lomé IV Convention in 1995 which included new areas of engagement such as democracy and good governance (Haastrup et al., 2021), and more widely with the Cotonou Agreement in 2000 which for the first time established peace as a policy priority, and even underlined the need for “mediation, negotiation and reconciliation efforts” (European Commission, 2014: 26). In 2001 the African countries created the African Union, which entered into force in 2002 (Haastrup et al., 2021). That same year, the AU created the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) which would operate as its “collective mechanism for conflict prevention, management and resolution” and involved the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC), the eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs), two Regional Mechanisms (RMs) and other subsequent institutions (Mabera, 2020: 2). The EU backed the creation of the AU and the APSA, and to support them in 2004 it created the African Peace Facility (APF) in response to the request made at the July 2003 AU Summit in Maputo (Mabera, 2020).

In 2007, the EU and AU signed the Africa-EU Strategic Partnership – A Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES), which placed a strong focus on peace and security and laid the foundations of the current EU contribution and approach to African peace and security. This document recognised the APSA as the main framework with which to cooperate, and its institutions as the actors responsible for peace and security in the continent and, therefore, the first responders to crisis. Under this scheme, the JAES states that the EU will consistently support the APSA through capacity building, training and funding, and that both institutions will strengthen cooperation and coordination in “conflict prevention and ... conflict

resolution” (Council of the European Union, 2007: 5). Since 2007, this cooperation *modus operandi* has been maintained and reinforced through multiple strategic documents and summits to date.³ The support for the APSA can be considered the backbone of EU foreign and security policy towards Africa (Interview I.11).

Mediation and mediation support have been provided for in the EU-Africa partnership as instruments for conflict prevention and resolution. Since 2007, the EU has been providing training, capacity building and funding to APSA institutions that are directly or indirectly involved in mediation, such as the Panel of the Wise, the AU PSC and all the corresponding mediation units of the RMs and RECs (European Parliament, 2014). By way of examples, in 2016 the EU helped the AU to create its Mediation Support Unit (MSU); in 2019 it provided support to the IGAD MSU (Bustamante & Carvalho, 2020); and in the 2018 EU-AU Memorandum of Understanding both organisations championed the use of mediation and recommended incrementing their experts' capacity building in this field (Council of the European Union, 2018a). Nevertheless, despite these multiple commitments, one of the most common criticisms of the EU-Africa partnership is that most of the resources are allocated to Peace and Support Operations (PSOs), and therefore to military and police support, rather than to conflict prevention, resolution and mediation (Yohannes & Dessa, 2021; Bergmann, 2023). This is clearly illustrated with the case of the APF.

The support for the African Peace and Security Architecture can be considered as the backbone of EU foreign and security policy towards Africa.

The APF has been the main source of funding for the APSA, largely coming from the EU, and it financed three components: the PSOs, APSA capacity building (including the mediation institutions mentioned above) and the Early Response Mechanism (ERM). The ERM was aimed at funding the APSA's fast-track and preventive efforts at the early stages of conflict, such as “mediation, shuttle diplomacy, the deployment of human rights observers or fact-finding missions” (International Crisis Group, 2021a: 4). It has provided significant support to multiple mediation initiatives that resulted in peace agreements, such as in South Sudan (Müller & Bergmann, 2020) or Kenya (Sheriff & Hauck, 2013). Nonetheless, from 2004 until 2019 the EU provided around €2.9bn through the APF, and from this total 93% was for PSOs, while 6% went to APSA's capacity building and 1% to the ERM (International Crisis Group, 2021a: 2). This demonstrates the prioritisation of securitisation over mediation and conflict prevention support.

In 2021, the APF was replaced by the European Peace Facility (EPF), which funds PSOs, and by the NDICI-Global Europe programme, which covers the APSA's capacity building and the ERM. This change has been identified as an example

3. Such as: (Council of the European Union, 2018) and (Council of the European Union, 2022a)

of the EU's pragmatic turn in its peace and security policy towards the African continent, because of the following implications. First, in contrast to the APF, the EPF for the first time will allow the EU and its member states to provide lethal equipment and bilateral military capacity building to partner countries, signalling the EU's interest in taking a much more defence-focused and militaristic approach (Bergmann, 2023). Second, while with the APF the AU oversaw and administered the funds received from the EU, with the EPF the EU will directly channel the funding to specific countries or ad hoc organisations without needing to consult with the AU. Some experts consider that sidelining the AU will diminish the APSA as a whole, as it breaks the subsidiarity rule and delegitimises the continental multilateral system (Woldemichael, 2022; Bergmann, 2023; Hauck & Tadesse, 2021). Third, unlike the APF, the EPF and the NDICI are two platforms with a global scope and consequently without clear earmarked funds for Africa. This complicates the financial planning of the AU PSOs that were dependent on the APF, and it risks dissipating the support provided to Africa in the event that new priorities (such as Ukraine) appear on the European agenda (International Crisis Group, 2021a; Hauck & Tadesse, 2021).

The EU has conceived the EPF as a platform to guarantee tighter control over the peace and security funding that it provides abroad (Woldemichael, 2022) and as a vehicle to fulfil its geopolitical aspirations (Bergmann, 2023; Hauck & Tadesse, 2021). Nevertheless, it has also raised concern about it being a tool for potential increased interventionism in the African continent without African states' consent (Woldemichael, 2022). Additionally, the EU's pragmatic and geopolitical turn may increase with the new 2024 commission, which has clearly indicated that it will focus on the EU's immediate neighbourhood, enlargement and Russia (Louv-Vaudran, 2024).

Besides the EPF, the EU's peace and security approach to the African continent has not been exempt from criticism. Over the last few years specifically the African elites and the population have displayed an increasing scepticism towards Europe (Hauck & Tadesse, 2021; Carbone, 2023; Tadesse & Di Commo, 2023). Some authors point at the asymmetric relationship of financial dependency between the AU and the EU (Yohannes & Dessa, 2021), which has also implied dynamics of "norms-setter versus norm taker" and "carrot and stick approaches" (Tadesse & Di Commo, 2023: 5), as a reason for the African states' pushback on the current partnership. Another argument widely shared within the scholar community is that EU support for the African continent has largely been securitised to advance its own migration and security agenda, rather than being based on reciprocity and development policies, as claimed

(Pye, 2024; Lavallée & Volkel, 2015; Venturi, 2017; Raineri & Strazzari, 2019). A third school of thought approaches EU-Africa relations from a structural perspective and argues that the EU rationale guiding its actions in the African continent follows a deeper hierarchy with colonial roots that neglects African agency in the partnership (Carbone, 2023; Hoijsink et al., 2023) and makes cynical use of the continent to cast the EU as a strong foreign policy and security actor (Gegout, 2009; Olsen, 2009; Haastrup et al., 2021; Pye, 2024). If these concerns are not examined by EU policymakers and a true relationship of equals is not pursued, the resentment towards Europe may well increase, rendering its peace and security policies ineffective.

As a concluding point, even though peace and security are a key pillar of EU-Africa relations, in practice peace mediation appears to play a minor role within the EU strategy towards the continent. Furthermore, the new signals sent out with the creation of the EPF or the new commission's priorities indicate that this role will probably become even smaller.

EU and the Horn

The Horn of Africa is located in the north-eastern corner of the continent and comprises the following countries: Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan and Uganda. These countries are part of the AU and are also all the members of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) (Council of the European Union, 2011). In November 2011, the council adopted the EU Strategic Framework for the Horn of Africa and in 2015, the Regional Action Plan: Horn of Africa 2015-2020. Both documents were justified referencing the geostrategic positioning of the region (on the shores of the Red Sea and the Gulf

of Aden) and the importance of its stability for the EU. Their priorities were peacebuilding, good governance and prevention of instability. The 2015 Action Plan included migration and the Red Sea. Both documents uphold regional ownership and action as the only solution to these challenges, and consequently call for supporting the IGAD and AU. Furthermore, they defended the use of mediation as a crisis prevention and management tool, and vowed to back local, regional and international mediation initiatives (Council of the European Union, 2011; 2015). The 2016 EUGS also pointed to the Horn as a priority area and proposed to address its regional challenges by developing "triangular relationships" of diplomacy between the Horn, North Africa and the Gulf (European Union Global Strategy, 2016: 35). In May 2021, the council endorsed a new strategy for the Horn, which built on the 2011 Strategic Framework, placed new emphasis on inclusivity and human rights and reiterated the need to support African-owned dialogue and mediation mechanisms (Council of the European Union, 2021c).

Even though peace and security are a key pillar of EU-Africa relations, in practice peace mediation appears to play a minor role within the EU strategy towards the continent. The new signals sent out with the creation of the European Peace Facility or the new commission's priorities indicate that this role will probably become even smaller.

The 2011 Strategic Framework approved the appointment of the EUSR for the Horn, who would lead the diplomatic approach to the region (established by their corresponding mandate) and harmonise the different EU instruments and programmes (Council of the European Union, 2011). During the period of our two case studies, two consecutive mandates instructed the EUSR for the Horn to advance peace, security and stability within the region and to cooperate with multiple actors ranging from civil society to the Gulf countries and Egypt. Additionally, the documents incorporated normative commitments such as promoting EU human rights policy, IHL and humanitarian access (Council of the European Union, 2018; Council of the European Union, 2021d). The 2021 mandate specifically included the need to support political transitions in Ethiopia and Sudan and commanded the EUSR to “initiate/steer, support and promote” Africa-owned dialogue, negotiation and mediation for conflict prevention and resolution (Council of the European Union, 2021d: 2).

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

To respond to the research question, I will conduct a comprehensive mapping of the different mediation-related actions undertaken by the EU in the two selected case studies (the 2020-2022 Ethiopia-Tigray war and the ongoing conflict in Sudan) and analyse them according to the “multi-mediator” framework developed by Davies. This framework is based on the concept of “multi-mediator”, which denotes a mediator capable of operating through multiple mediation tracks, engaging at multiple layers (from the local to the international), acting at multiple conflict phases (from prevention to implementation of peace agreements) and being multilateral (acting in concert with other actors). I have chosen this framework because it is accurate and well aligned with the results that I have obtained in the data analysis, in the sense that it illustrates that the EU is not a mediator with a sole *modus operandi* but a polyhedral actor with capacity to operate at different levels, through different institutions, with different tools and throughout the conflict cycle. To illustrate this, I will employ Davies’ 2018 analytical framework with some specific modifications.

The analytical framework uses the three-track model developed by Lederach, and in every track it categorises the actions according to three capabilities. In his 1997 book, Lederach divided conflict-affected societies into three different “tracks” that can engage in mediation. Track I includes the “top leadership”, Track II the “middle-range leadership” which encompasses civil society organisations (CSOs), religious authorities, influential figures or mid-level politicians, and Track III comprises grassroots leadership and local communities (Lederach, 1997). The capabilities are:

1. Capability to engage, which considers the interactions with the warring parties by employing EU “policies,

institutional set-up and instruments” (Davies, 2018: 183). This includes the initiatives taken by the EUSRs, delegations or others and the exertion of leverage through incentives and punitive measures. This engagement can be either to directly mediate or to support third party mediation.

2. Capability to fund, which refers to the use of EU instruments to fund mediation support processes.
3. Capability to coordinate and cooperate, which covers two aspects. The first is the capacity to create internal cohesion both between EU institutions and between the EU and member states. The second is engagement with external actors that are not the warring parties (such as international and regional organisations, foreign governments, local authorities or CSOs) to back the mediation process. As the external coordination and cooperation activities are mostly used to gather and garner support for third parties’ initiatives (Davies, 2018), in this aspect I also include the capacity to endorse which is defined as giving support to present “a third party as competent and legitimate” (Müller & Bergmann, 2020: 153).

Additionally, the EU has presented itself in both mediation concepts as a values-based and hence normative actor. Therefore, observations on this point will be made using specific examples in the Analysis section, while a wider evaluation of the consequences and limits of this normative approach will follow in the Discussion.

The EU is not a mediator with a sole *modus operandi* but a polyhedral actor with capacity to operate at different levels, through different institutions, with different tools and throughout the conflict cycle.

METHODOLOGY

I used qualitative methods document analysis and semi-structured interviews. The data was then categorised and analysed according to the analytical framework. Additionally, some secondary sources have been consulted to enrich the analysis.

Time frame and case study selection

To illustrate the extent of EU mediation during the first Von der Leyen commission (2019-2024), this research uses two case studies: the 2020-2022 Ethiopia-Tigray war and the ongoing conflict (since April 15th, 2023) in Sudan. These two case studies were chosen for the following reasons. First, both conflicts happen in a geographical area of strategic significance for the EU (Council of the European Union, 2021c), so the EU would be expected to have a strong interest in finding a solution to end the violence. Second, they are two fully-fledged wars with profound humanitarian impacts and feature widespread human rights abuses. Given that the EU portrays itself as an actor aiming to “promote peace, security and progress in Europe and in the World” (Treaty on European Union, 1992: 1) and the fact that the EU is the major provider of humanitarian aid to the African continent, it would be logical to assert that both wars are of concern to the EU. Third, both cases happen in a context where multiple

foreign actors became involved and there were various peace mediation initiatives,⁴ hence given the geopolitical aspirations of this new commission it is worth exploring how the EU copes in this context.

One challenge that arises from the selection of these two case studies is the fact that the Sudan conflict is still ongoing. As a result, the analysis of the Sudan case study has been limited to the period from April 2023 (when hostilities began) to April 30th, 2024.⁵

Data-collection methods

Document analysis has been used to review the public statements and documents of the EU to understand its positions, the support announced to third parties and to identify the main actions and processes implemented in the two case studies. The data gathered for this method were the council conclusions adopted by the Council of the EU, the statements and declarations released by the EEAS, the HRVP, the EUSR for the Horn and other related institutions or actors, and the brief statements published on the social network X, by the EUSR for the Horn. The data gathered was coded into two tables, one for each case study,⁶ and organised chronologically. The variables in the table are Type of Engagement (including statements/council conclusions, visits, trips, meetings, calls, sanctions, provision of aid and conferences), Date, EU institution (indicating which EU actor conducted the specific action) and Description. While this method is very useful to understand the official stance of the EU, and to identify a wide variety of engagements, it has limitations related to the secrecy that characterises the mediation field and consequently I acknowledge that I am missing a lot of information that is not publicly available or announced.

Semi-structured interviews were used to address the information gaps in the public information reviewed through document analysis, and to provide a more coherent and comprehensive understanding of the processes that underpin EU mediation in the two case studies. I interviewed 11 experts via phone or video call: scholars, EU officials, officers from independent mediation organisations, members of Sudanese and Ethiopian civil society and a Tigrayan mediator. I interviewed professionals with a wide range of expertise and stakes to gain an understanding of the topic from many angles. The content of the interviews varied according to the specialisation of the interviewee and concentrated on the EU mediation capabilities in general or specifically in the case studies. Out of the 11 interviewees, six are Europeans and five are Africans, from Ethiopia and Sudan. This geographical composition was chosen purposely to integrate opinions and perceptions from both sides of the EU-Africa partnership and therefore to spot what is missing or unnecessary. All the interviews have been anonymised, numbered and included in the references.

Limitations

This research identified the following limitations. First, it was difficult to find the financial information on the support provided to the African Union, IGAD or other mediation support initiatives. This is probably because this information will only be released years after the interventions are completed. For this reason, the data used in the capability to fund section is generic and has come from the interviews and the document analysis. Second, the mediation field is traditionally based on secrecy, therefore it was difficult to obtain specific information on all the actions conducted by the EU. This was present in the interviews, as on several occasions the interviewees expressed their desire not to comment on information that was deemed confidential. Equally, at the time the research was conducted, the European Commission term had not finished so there was not enough reflection on its impact. The issue of secrecy is aggravated by the fact that the civil war in Sudan is still ongoing and this is also a reason why there is less information available. Finally, using a case study methodology implies a significant limitation in extrapolating the results of this article to EU engagement in peace mediation in sub-Saharan Africa as a whole. In essence, EU mediation depends on multiple factors that must not be oversimplified. The historical and present context of each country and of every conflict is unique, so peace mediation practices will always have to be adapted to the specific context. Specifically, the two case studies are both from the Horn of Africa, and therefore their characteristics differ from other regions of sub-Saharan Africa. Nonetheless, these case studies reveal trends and concerns which are of relevance for the field.

ANALYSIS

The Ethiopia-Tigray war (November 2020- November 2022)

Background

After several months of internal disputes over political and constitution issues, on November 4th, 2020, fighting erupted in Ethiopia's northern region of Tigray between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF). The conflict ended on November 2nd, 2022, with the Pretoria Agreement. The war had different stages with many offensives and counter-offensives between the two sides and spread throughout the northern part of the country, almost reaching the capital Addis Ababa (International Crisis Group, 2022). During the war, the ENDF received military support from Eritrean troops and regional paramilitary forces. The war resulted in at least 307,568 fatalities (Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2023), forced the displacement of more than 4.2 million people (International Organization for Migration, 2022) and there were multiple reports of widespread war crimes and human rights violations committed by both sides (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Amnesty International, 2022).

Despite initial mediation attempts by the IGAD, the main peace agreement was mediated by the African Union envoy, Olusegun Obasanjo, supported by the former Kenyan president, Uhuru Kenyatta, and South Africa's former deputy president, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka. The AU

4. Further details on the case studies will be provided in the Background section of each case study.

5. Which was the suitable time period in light of the deadline for this article.

6. The two tables have not been included in this publication but are kept on file with the author.

efforts were strongly supported by the US, and to a certain extent by the EU. Besides Eritrea, which was a direct warring faction, both sides received different degrees of support from foreign actors such as Sudan, Egypt, the UAE, China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Russia and Iran (Abate, 2023; Caruso & Akamo, 2024).

Capabilities Track I

Capability to engage

The whole EU engagement in the mediation process was focused not on directly mediating but on supporting the mediation efforts led by the AU (Interviews I.3; I.8). Together with mediation support, the two other pillars of the EU approach were normative and consisted of calling for humanitarian aid provision to Tigray and compliance with international humanitarian law (IHL). The EU engagement was conducted through the Special Envoy, the EUSR for the Horn and in some instances through the higher authorities. This last category includes some specific meetings such as the one held by HRVP Josep Borrell with the Ethiopian foreign affairs minister in December 2020 (European External Action Service, 2020b), or the three phone conversations that President of the European Council Charles Michel held with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in 2021 and 2022 (Council of the European Union, 2021a; 2021e; 2022c). More than having an impact, these surgical interventions served to clearly lay out the aforementioned three pillars of the EU position.

The EU stepped up its engagement in late January 2021 when Borrell appointed Pekka Haavisto, the then Finnish minister of foreign affairs, as his Special Envoy to Ethiopia (Finland in EU, 2021). Haavisto made two trips to the Horn, in February and April 2021, together with EUSR for the Horn Alexander Rondos, in which he held multiple meetings with Ethiopian senior officials, including Abiy and President Sahle Work-Zewde (Pekka Haavisto, 2021a; 2021b; 2021g; 2021h; 2021i). The purpose was to engage with the Ethiopian authorities and regional partners, to pressure for dialogue and a ceasefire, humanitarian access to Tigray and compliance with IHL. Nevertheless, his role as special envoy ended in June 2021 after he revealed to the European Parliament the plausibility that the federal government was committing ethnic cleansing (Interview I.9; Cara, 2021). In the interviews, Haavisto's appointment was perceived as a clear example of the EU's readiness to step up mediation resources (Interview I.8) and despite the limitations his engagements were recognised as positive (Interviews I.2; I.9).

The most active EU actor in mediation engagement was the EUSR for the Horn. When the conflict started, the EUSR was Alexander Rondos, but in July 2021 he was replaced by Annette Weber. According to publicly available data,

Weber met in Addis Ababa with Ethiopian senior officials more than nine times (on some occasions with other EU officials), in which she constantly compelled them to join the AU mediation efforts and tied it to the normalisation of Ethiopia-EU relations (Demeke Mekonnen Hassen, 2021; 2022; Roland Kobia 2021; 2022; Jutta Urpilainen 2021; Annette Weber 2021; 2022a; 2022b; 2022e). Concerning Rondos, in the interviews it was confirmed that from the outset he was also strongly engaged with both sides (Interviews I.8; I.9). Two differences in approach between them that were noted in the interviews were: first, Weber's position was perceived as firmly pragmatic, while Rondos balanced pragmatism with strong normative principles (Interviews I.8; I.9), and second, Rondos engaged more with the TPLF than Weber (who kept strong contact mainly with the federal government) (Interview I.9). Overall, it seems clear that both EUSRs were actively involved to support and advocate for AU mediation as the preferential solution to the conflict (Interviews I.2; I.3; I.8; I.9; I.10; I.11).

Despite these efforts, almost all the interviewees agreed that the EU engagement in mediation was not meaningful enough to consider the EU an essential actor in the peace process that led to the Pretoria Agreement (Interviews I.1; I.2; I.8; I.9). In fact, the EU was rejected by the federal government as a potential observing member of the latter. The reasons identified

were twofold. First, Abiy's government was resentful of the EU's tough normative position taken during the first months of the conflict, through which it accused Ethiopia of blocking humanitarian aid and committing war crimes and human rights violations. (Interviews I.1; I.2; I.8; I.9). Second, the EU lacked the leverage to bring the parties to the table, but this will be explained in the Discussion section.

The whole EU engagement in the mediation process was focused not on directly mediating but on supporting the mediation efforts led by the AU. Together with mediation support, the two other pillars of the EU approach were normative and consisted of calling for humanitarian aid provision to Tigray and compliance with international humanitarian law.

Capability to fund

Part of the support provided to the AU, was in the form of funding channelled into sustaining the efforts of Obasanjo's team (Interview I.8). Nevertheless, the exact amounts provided were not found.

Capability to coordinate and cooperate

Internal divisions and lack of cohesion were identified by the majority of interviewees as one of the main causes of the lack of consistent EU engagement in the Ethiopia-Tigray conflict (Interview I.1; I.8; I.9; I.10). The strong normative position taken by Borrell, the EEAS, EUSR Rondos, DG ECHO and

7. On some occasions Weber was also joined by Urpilainen from DG INTPA, by the EU ambassador to the AU, and in September 2022 (during the Ethiopian-Eritrean major offensive in Tigray) by the EEAS director of African affairs (Roland Kobia, 2021; 2022; Jutta Urpilainen 2021)

DG INTPA contrasted with the behaviour and interests of some member states (MSs). This played out in two ways. One was through incoherence between EU and MS policies. After the EU suspended the Budget Support Programme with Ethiopia in January 2021, some MSs such as Germany, France or Italy maintained their bilateral aid to Ethiopia and consequently diminished the EU leverage (Interview I.1). The second was imposed from the council, when the March 2021 Council Conclusions (Council of the European Union, 2021b) shifted the EU normative stance to a more pragmatic one and eased the tone against Abiy's government (Interview I.1). There could be various reasons for this turn, but the most plausible seem to be political affinity and economic interests (Interview I.9), and fear that being too harsh with a strategic partner could end up pushing it towards geopolitical competitors (Interview I.8).

On the subject of external coordination, this case study is a good example of how, in line with the ethos of the EU-Africa Partnership, the EU invested in coordinating and gathering support behind the AU mediation efforts (Interview I.1; I.2; I.3). This was well illustrated by the actions of the Special Envoy, the EUSR and the multiple statements of the EU. In his second mission, Haavisto visited Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt in order to harmonise positions and coordinate actions (Pekka Haavisto, 2021d; 2021e). Additionally, he also held in-person meetings and phone calls with high-ranking officials of the League of Arab States (LAS) and with UN Secretary-General António Guterres (Pekka Haavisto 2021c; 2021f; 2021j). A similar pattern was followed by the EUSR, who made several trips to the Gulf and Egypt (Egypt MFA Spokesperson, 2021; Foreign Ministry, 2021) and held meetings with Turkish and Chinese representatives (Interview I.8). Both the EUSR and Haavisto strongly engaged and coordinated with the AU (Interview I.3; I.8; Amb. Smail Chergui, 2021; Pekka Haavisto, 2021k; Amb. Bankole Adeoye, 2021; Annette Weber, 2022d; 2022f). This backing also took the form of endorsement of the AU mediation initiative, as demonstrated in the statements published by the EEAS and the Council of the EU (Council of the European Union, 2020b; 2022d; European External Action Service, 2020a; 2021a; 2022b; 2022c; 2022d), the 2021 Council Conclusions (Council of the European Union, 2021b) or in the social media accounts of EU officials (Josep Borrell Fontelles, 2021; Annette Weber, 2022b; 2022d). Additionally, the EU also worked in tandem with the US to align agendas and coordinate efforts on mediation support (Interview I.1; I.2). This cooperation materialised in joint shuttle diplomacy carried out by the EUSR and the US special envoy, in August 2022, when they approached the TPLF in Mekelle (European External Action Service, 2022b). Finally, it is worth mentioning that the EU also tried to expand its coordination efforts by engaging Eritrea in June 2022 (European External Action Service, 2022a). Nonetheless, this had little impact due to the isolationist and anti-Western character of the regime in Asmara (Interview I.8).

The case of the Ethiopia-Tigray war is a good example of how, in line with the ethos of the EU-Africa Partnership, the EU invested in coordinating and gathering support behind the AU mediation efforts.

Capabilities Track II and III

Capability to fund

This research has attempted to better understand if there was EU funding for mediation NGOs working in Track 2 and 3, but it failed to obtain clear responses. The interviewees with insider knowledge of the Ethiopian peace process said that there had been no involvement of such organisations funded by the EU, and that there was no engagement at grassroots level (Interview I.8; I.9). Nevertheless, a January 2021 International Crisis Group report explained that the EU had been funding such activities (International Crisis Group, 2021b).

The Sudan conflict (April 2023- present)

Background

On April 15th, 2023, the conflict in Sudan began between the paramilitary group Rapid Support Forces (RSF) led by Hemedti and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) led by General Al-Burhan. The immediate causes were disagreements over security sector reform and specifically over how the RSF would be integrated into the SAF, as part of a long-term plan to restore civilian rule. The fighting started in Khartoum but quickly escalated and spread throughout the whole country (International Crisis Group, 2024a). On the sidelines, there is a wide amalgam of civil society groups and political parties that were part of the previous transitional process and which are key to build a political future for the country (International Crisis Group, 2024a). To May 2024, the war provoked the largest displacement crisis in the world, with 9 million internally displaced people, and a deep humanitarian catastrophe, with approximately 28 million people in need of humanitarian assistance (International Organization for Migration, 2024).

The mediation context in Sudan has been characterised by its fragmentation and diversity of initiatives. The first and most prominent was the Jeddah talks led by Saudi Arabia and the US, which focused on a ceasefire and humanitarian access. The second, led by the IGAD, tried to find a political solution to the conflict. Despite its initial success this option ultimately stalled. The third, led by Egypt, involved the neighbouring countries and concentrated on humanitarian access and the regional implications of the conflict (International Crisis Group, 2023b). Until May 15th, it seemed that the AU was the institution trying to coordinate and mainstream the different processes under the same umbrella and to integrate the political solution (African Union Peace and Security Department, 2023). The last news showed that the AU aimed to do this by scaling up the Jeddah platform (Interview I.4). Due to the lack of success in this task, in March 2024 the AU created the High-Level Panel to steer efforts (Kinkoh, 2024). At the same time, in Sudan there were

several actors from outside the Horn involved in supporting the two belligerents, such as Chad, UAE, Russia or Egypt, which further complicated the mediation process (Campbell-James, 2024).

Capabilities Track I

Capability to engage

In this case, the EU has not attempted to mediate but it is clearly supporting the African Union-led and IGAD mediation efforts, and specifically the political process rather than the military one (Interview I.4; I.7; I.11). Four interviewees said that EUSR Weber conducted intensive shuttle diplomacy between influential regional powers and on some occasions with both sides (Interview I.6; I.7; I.10; I.11; International Crisis Group, 2024b). Weber was even present in some of the IGAD mediation initiatives, such as in January 2024 in Uganda (Interview I.4; I.7), where she had a meeting with Hemedti that went public (Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, 2024). Nevertheless, it seems that these actions have been aimed at strengthening the political process and understanding the different positions rather than at directly mediating (Interview I.7). Despite this, in January 2024 the EU used its leverage to support the AU and IGAD mediation by approving sanctions against arms-supplying entities related to the SAF and the RSF aimed at pressuring the belligerents to sit down at the negotiating table (Council of the European Union, 2023e).

The different reasons put forward for the EU reticence to try to mediate have been a lack of weight and willingness to deal with the military (Interview I.2; I.6), a strong focus in the democratic transition and mediation support (Interview I.3; I.7; I.11) and even the fact that both belligerents have strong ties with geopolitical adversaries such as Russia, China or Wagner (Interview I.1).

Capability to fund

The EU has been providing considerable funding to the AU mediation initiative, and specifically to the AU Core Group (in which the EU is a member) and the High-Level Panel on Sudan (Interview I.4; I.7). Nevertheless, one of the interviewees outlined that the EU funding and support is insufficient or not sufficiently well allocated, arguing that the AU is not suitable yet to be a legitimate and impartial mediator, and that it requires further technical support and capacity building (Interview I.6).

Capability to coordinate and cooperate

Concerning internal coordination, the EU seemed to achieve more internal cohesion with the member states than in the case of Ethiopia, and France and Germany actively teamed up with the EU to address the Sudan conflict. Weber met with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in May 2023 in

Nairobi to coordinate efforts on Sudan and multiple times with Foreign Affairs Minister Annalena Baerbock in both Nairobi and Germany (Annette Weber, 2023b; 2023h; 2024a; 2024h). Baerbock specifically travelled to Nairobi with Weber in January 2024 to engage with Kenyan President Ruto and members of Sudanese civil society (Annette Weber, 2024a). In December 2023, both countries arranged a workshop on Sudan in New York with Weber and regional and international partners (Annette Weber, 2023i). On April 15th, 2024, the France-Germany-EU trio organised the International Humanitarian Conference for Sudan in Paris, which gathered a large donor community, and on the sidelines it convened a joint seminar for Sudanese civil society organisations (Annette Weber, 2024e; French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2024). Furthermore, since the crisis started Weber has been routinely informing the EU Political and Security Committee (Annette Weber, 2023c; 2024c; 2024g).

One pillar of the EU mediation strategy has been to support any consistent mediation effort led by the AU or the IGAD, in order to ensure that African institutions own the process (Interview I.3; I.4; I.7; I.11). Since April 2023, the EU has been an active member of the Extended Mechanism led by the AU Commission, which aims to coordinate the different mediation initiatives “to avoid fragmentation” (African Union, 2023a). In addition, it is working in close contact with the AU High-Level Panel and is part of the AU Core Group (Birgitte Markussen, 2023; Annette Weber 2023a; 2023i; 2024d; 2024i) in charge of offering guidance on engagement and “if needed develop Mediation and Facilitation processes” (African Union, 2023b: 4).

Moreover, the EUSR has been attending most of the IGAD meetings (Interview I.4; I.7; I.10) and frequently exchanging views with its executive secretary, Workneh Gebeyeh (Hon. Aden Duale, 2023; Laranjinha EU, 2023; Annette Weber, 2023e; 2023k; 2024b; 2024f). The backing for the AU and IGAD has also taken the shape of direct endorsement through multiple EU official statements (Council of the European Union, 2023a; 2023b; 2023c; 2023d; 2024).

To underpin the AU and IGAD mediation efforts, the EU has conducted extensive external coordination through shuttle diplomacy between the different relevant foreign actors. The EUSR made several trips to Egypt and the Gulf (UAE and Saudi Arabia) to engage with representatives of these countries, the Gulf Cooperation Council and the LAS in order to convene, understand positions and facilitate communications and processes (Interview I.7; I.11; EU in the GCC, 2023; Gulf Cooperation Council, 2024; Josep Borrell Fontelles, 2023b; Annette Weber, 2023d; 2023f; 2023g; 2023j; 2024f). There has been prominent engagement with the Arab countries, as they have strong influence over the belligerents. Shortly after the war began, on April 17th, 2023, President of the Council Charles Michel called the UAE’s de facto ruler, Mohammed bin Zayed, to discuss the need to deescalate and

In Sudan, the EU has not attempted to mediate but it is clearly supporting the African Union-led and IGAD mediation efforts, and specifically the political process rather than the military one.

prioritise a ceasefire (Charles Michel, 2023). In June 2023, Borrell travelled with Weber to Cairo to visit President Al-Sisi and raise the issue of Sudan (Josep Borrell Fontelles, 2023b; 2023c), and in October 2023, the EU organised a joint Ministerial Meeting with the GCC to support the AU, LAS and IGAD political mediation track (Council of the European Union, 2023c). The EU's other key partner has been the Troika contact group (UK, US and Norway) which has been operating in the region since the independence of South Sudan in 2011 (European External Action Service, 2023a; 2023b; Norwegian Government, 2024). Nevertheless, in contrast to Ethiopia, the US has acted more independently from the EU (Interview I.6).

Capabilities Track II

Capability to engage

The other main pillar of the EU approach has been based on its normative principles and consisted in supporting the integration of an inclusive political track into the main mediation process, to resume the transition to civilian power interrupted by the start of the war. For this purpose, the EU has been strongly supporting Sudanese civil society organisations and political platforms and seeking the inclusion of women (Interview I.1; I.7; I.11). Part of it consisted of facilitating Track II mediation among these different organisations to create a united front. For instance, on April 15th the EU organised informal meetings on the sidelines of the Paris Humanitarian Conference to foster dialogue between the multiple civilian platforms with opposing views. This was considered groundbreaking as it was the first time that all these groups with conflicting interests (including supporters of the SAF, RSF, civilian transition, etc) had been gathered together (Interview I.7). The EUSR has been very active in this framework, consulting, supporting and facilitating communication between the various groups involved, including the Taqaddum platform led by the former transitional prime minister, Abdalla Hamdok (Interview I.6; I.7; Annette Weber, 2023i). One positive note on the EU engagement with the CSOs has been that while the member states used the "silver bullet approach", trying to gather all the groups under Taqaddum, the EU engaged in a more constructive and neutral manner, respecting the autonomy and local ownership of the process (Interview I.4). One criticism has been that the EU has failed to really identify and involve all the main CSOs and has ended up supporting the political elites that hijack the process (Interview I.6).

Capability to fund

The EU has funded the different civilian political platforms and CSOs participating in the political track in order to strengthen their operational capabilities (Interview I.7).

Additionally, the EU has also been funding some European mediation NGOs that have provided capacity building to the groups involved in the civilian track and facilitated dialogue between them (International Crisis Group, 2024b).

Capability to cooperate and coordinate

The EU has entrusted to the AU the task of integrating the civilian track (Track II) into the core mediation process, which is the Jeddah Platform (Track I). This outsourcing initiative constitutes an EU effort to build inter-track linkages and to enhance AU ownership of the process. To this end, the EU facilitated Jeddah back-up talks in Bahrain (Interview I.4). Nevertheless, one common criticism of this approach has been that the AU has proved incapable of properly assimilating and incorporating the civilian platforms and CSOs into the process, and in the end it only cooperated with the elites. The reason for this failure has been the EU's inability to implement oversight mechanisms in the mediation support provided to the AU and its neglect of the corruption, subjectivity and bad practices rooted in this organisation (Interview I.4; I.6).

Capabilities Track III

Capability to fund

The main involvement in Track III has consisted of funding European mediation NGOs that have organised dialogue programmes at the grassroots level to identify points of consensus, conflict and other relevant issues. These initiatives are key to inform the main mediation processes (happening at Track I) and to open opportunities and communication channels (Interview I.7). Moreover, one interviewee explained that the EU's strong engagement with civil society has been possible thanks to the past democracy support projects (on human rights, democracy promotion, CSOs, etc.) that the EU and its member states have been funding since the times of Al-Bashir. The connections established through those projects provided support networks that the EU mobilised to build entry points for the political process and mediation (Interview I.4).

The other main pillar of the EU approach to the Sudanese conflict has been based on its normative principles and consisted in supporting the integration of an inclusive political track into the main mediation process, to resume the transition to civilian power interrupted by the start of the war.

DISCUSSION

This section will explore the overall factors affecting EU engagement and involvement in peace mediation by presenting a strength, a weakness and an opportunity for improvement that have been identified after analysing the cases and relating them to the bigger picture of EU mediation.

Strength: multi-mediator capacities

First the strength. The two case studies have illustrated that thanks to its own capabilities, instruments and nature the EU

can be considered a “multi-mediator”. This is because it can operate in the following dimensions:

- *Multi-track*: As largely demonstrated with the Sudan case and to a lesser extent in Ethiopia, the EU can engage in the three mediation tracks and even create links between them. Even though it is not that well-suited to directly mediate in Track I (for reasons that will be explained later), it can be a useful coordinator aiming to support Track I efforts launched by others. In Track II the EU proved to be effective in the three capabilities, and in Track III the EU can be prominent due to its strong will and capacity to finance European mediation NGOs and local third-party initiatives.
- *Multi-layered*: As the cases displayed, mediation contexts today involve multiple levels of actors, from international and regional actors involved as sponsors or spoilers of the peace process, to local communities and non-state armed groups. The EU has a good capacity to approach these different layers because it also has a multi-level institutional toolbox that it can mobilise, from the president of the council and the HRVP for high-level contacts to the EUSR for long-term partnerships and flexible engagements, or the EU delegations and mediation NGOs for the grassroots level and CSOs. Additionally, if the member states are aligned with the same policy goals as the EU, they can provide wider diplomatic clout and complement, support or even replicate EU mediation efforts by exerting pressure or opening parallel communication channels (Interview I.5; I.8; I.10).
- *Multilateral*: The two case studies demonstrated that the EU does not act alone, but rather in concert with other actors, and generally it seeks to ensure compliance with common norms or standards. Specifically, the EU’s strongest asset is its capability to steer mediation support, facilitate communication and coordinate and cooperate with other institutional actors (IGAD, AU, UN, GCC and LAS) or with states (US, Gulf countries, Troika).
- *Multi-dynamic*: The EU has capacity to engage in the different stages of the conflict cycle and to combine long- and short-term perspectives, which if well implemented can have a positive impact on the mediation process. For instance, the EU was well positioned to mobilise the CSO networks in Sudan because it had supported them previously. In Ethiopia, even though the EU was not part of the Pretoria Agreement, subsequently it is proving to be a key actor in its follow-up, in the sense that it has made the normalisation of EU-Ethiopia relations conditional on the three pillars of the initial approach (ceasefire, accountability of IHL and human rights violations and humanitarian access) (Interview I.8; I.11; Council of the European Union, 2022e). On a similar note, the EU’s insistence on supporting the mediation of the AU (in Ethiopia and Sudan) and IGAD (in Sudan) is part of a wider, long-term strategy to enhance

The EU’s role in the Ethiopia-Tigray war and in the Sudanese conflict have illustrated that thanks to its own capabilities, instruments and nature the EU can be considered a “multi-mediator”.

the regional stability of the Horn by strengthening its regional cooperation institutions and dialogue platforms (Interview I.3; I.7; Council of the European Union, 2021c).

Weakness: structural constraints

Second, the weakness. Even though the EU has the capacity to mobilise multiple instruments through different avenues, the two case studies have shown that it cannot lead mediation, not at least outside its neighbourhood. To put it plainly, the EU is not the decisive actor that brings the parties to the table to sign the deal. To understand this, the Ethiopia case is very illustrative. As mentioned in the analysis, together with rejection of the EU normative position, lack of leverage goes a long way to explaining why the EU was not in the Pretoria Agreement, and the three reasons for it were lack of appropriate authority, mandate and tools. Concerning authority, even though the EUSRs were very active, as one interviewee mentioned, the EUSR position does not seem authoritative enough as there is no direct power backing it (Interview I.2). Another interviewee identified the same problem in Sudan (Interview I.6). One good instrument to overcome this is the figure of the Special Envoy. As one interviewee stated, Haavisto had considerable legitimacy in the eyes of the two warring parties and the regional actors, for the simple fact that he was the foreign minister of a country

(Interview I.8). Nevertheless, Haavisto failed because of the two other reasons. In contrast to the US special envoy, who was specifically sent to solve that conflict and had full flexibility and wider boundaries, Haavisto’s mandate was short, part-time and unclear (it lacked parameters set by the member states) and he was

considered too critical by the government (Interview I.2; I.8; I.9). The other reason is the tools. While the EU seems to have instruments to punish or to incentivise action, the main impediment is that to mobilise them it needs consensus among the 27 member states (Interview I.1; I.2; I.3; I.8; I.10). In Ethiopia, the only measure that the EU used to leverage its position was the postponement in January 2021 of the €88m from the Budget Support Programme (European External Action Service, 2021a). Nevertheless, when Borrell proposed – at least twice (Council of the European Union, 2021b) – to impose sanctions on the federal government, EU internal divisions prevented them from materialising.

Building on this, the case of Ethiopia demonstrated that the lack of authoritative figures for mediation can be easily overcome by using the special envoys, or by directly mobilising the HRVP as in the Balkans, or the president of the council as in Georgia 2008 (Herrberg, 2021; Sheriff & Hauck, 2013). Nevertheless, the issue of the mediator’s mandate and the tools are two problems linked to the structural characteristics and constraints of the EU, meaning the EU can only give flexible and comprehensive mandates to its mediators if the 27 member states agree to do so. The same applies to the tools, such as sanctions or development packages, which can only

be employed if there is consensus in the council. The fact that the EU is an institution dependent on the 27 member states' consent has been identified by most of the interviewees as the main impediment to exercising leverage and, consequently, to successfully leading mediation (Interview I.1; I.2; I.3; I.4; I.5; I.8; I.9; I.10). Additionally, the complex and robust procedures of its financial assistance and aid further reduce the flexibility to activate its leverage (Interview I.2). Added to this is the fact that in an increasingly fragmented world with growing competition among powers, this leverage will be further weakened by the existence of new players (such as China, Russia or the Gulf countries) which are willing to provide incentives without as many conditions as the EU (Interview I.1; I.4; I.6; I.8; I.10).

Bearing this in mind, it seems that the EU can only be a strong actor "at the table"⁸ if all its member states agree, or if there is a lack of interest and therefore they have no objections (Sheriff & Hauck, 2013). Nevertheless, this does not mean that the EU should not engage in mediation, rather that it needs to reframe its approach. Considering that the EU has multiple instruments and institutions that allow it to be a "multi-mediator", it seems that the areas where it really can make an impact are "above the table" (through mediation support) or "beyond the table" (by sustaining agreements).⁹ Indeed, in their work, Sheriff and Hauck illustrate that outside Europe the cases in which the EU has positively advanced mediation have been the ones in which it has been operating in these domains rather than leading (Sheriff & Hauck, 2013).

Opportunity: normative approach

In this context, normativity appears to be the potential comparative that the EU has when operating "above the table" and "beyond the table", and consequently this is the opportunity to improve. Some scholars thought that the "normative character" of the EU could be an impediment rather than an advantage (Haastrup et al., 2014; Peral, 2012; Nouwen, 2022). In a sense, this point is backed by the Ethiopian case as the federal government rejected the EU due to its normative positioning (Interview I.1; I.2; I.8; I.9). At the same time, one of the interviewed experts in Ethiopia said that even despite this rebuff, the EU's constant pressure together with its coordination and cooperation capabilities had a positive effect, as the three boundaries set from the start of the war were later used by the AU and the US to formulate the content of the Pretoria Agreement (Interview I.8). This point is amplified in the Sudan case study. The three interviewees with expertise on Sudan coincided in affirming that the EU has been perceived as the main actor promoting inclusivity, leading the support for civil society

and political platforms and advocating for their integration into the mediation process (Interview I.4; I.6; I.7). Thus, the cases show that thanks to its normative approach, the EU has been successful to a certain degree in setting the agenda in Ethiopia and in structuring part of the mediation process in Sudan. A normative approach is understood as the pursuit of its strategy based on norms and principles that the EU considers foundational, such as the rule of law, democracy and inclusivity. Additionally, it must be mentioned that in both cases the interviewees perceived the impacts of this normative approach as positive because the principles promoted can be considered enablers of sustainable peace (Interview I.4; I.6; I.7; I.8).

Going forward, this normative approach makes sense if it is considered within the general framework of EU mediation. As explained, the EU has structural constraints that prevent it from being an impactful leading mediator in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, as the EU is a multilateral mediator, it already cooperates with other actors that are better positioned to lead mediation – either because they have clearer authority and more flexible leverage (such as the US, the EU member states or the Gulf countries) or more legitimacy and knowledge of the local context (such as the AU and IGAD). Therefore, it makes more sense for the EU to support mediation rather than to lead it. In this position

of "mediation supporter", the EU is less tied to the process and therefore has more flexibility and room for manoeuvre to put forward a normative approach that can positively complement the main mediation process by introducing components that make the resulting peace more sustainable (such as rule of law, accountability, inclusivity of women and youth, etc.). Sudan is an example of how the normative approach can work. The EU has supported

other actors better positioned than itself to lead mediation (the US, Saudi Arabia and the AU) and meanwhile it has concentrated on advancing matters on which it has more expertise (due to its history), which is regional integration, political dialogue and civil transition.

In this regard, the normative approach is an opportunity for improvement because it would be a way of aligning the EU multiple tools and instruments with its unique comparative advantage, which are its norms and values, in order to advance sustainable peace. In return, this normative approach would also serve the geopolitical ambitions of the EU, as it could be a way of projecting its unique "soft power" and, at the same time, consolidating its main interests in the EU-Africa partnership, which are advancing peace and security.

Nevertheless, this normative approach can be jeopardised by two main factors. The first factor is internal divergences. This can take the form of either a lack of agreement among the 27 member states on the normative principles that should

It seems that the EU can only be a strong actor "at the table" (leading, co-leading or mediating) if all its member states agree, or if there is a lack of interest and therefore they have no objections. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the EU should not engage in mediation, rather that it needs to reframe its approach.

8. As per (Herrberg, 2021) terminology.

9. As per (Herrberg, 2021) terminology.

be put forward, or as was demonstrated in Ethiopia, a clash between the EU's normative ambitions and the interests-based behaviour of some member states (Interview I.1; I.5; I.8; I.9; I.10). One potential option to address this challenge could be the "strategic framework of overarching normative principles" proposed by Bergmann and Friesen. This would consist of a pre-established blueprint of basic norms and standards, agreed by all 27 MSs, to be put forward in every peace intervention in which EU actors engage (2021: 6), and from which mediators could build with more norms according to the context. This blueprint would clarify the actions of EU mediators, prevent disagreements between MSs on which position to take in every peace process and could also be presented as a distinctive EU model or "pedigree" to be brought to peace processes. Nonetheless, to be effective this blueprint should not be overly ambitious, as the normative approach could only work if it is conflict-sensitive and tailored to the local context. This means that it should be implemented with humility and most importantly by embedding the norms in the local context and letting the counterparts involved transform them into locally owned policy options (European Union State of the Union Discussion Panel, 2021).

The second factor is the lack of consistency and double standards in EU foreign policy. Several interviewees confirmed that the fact that the EU advocates for some specific norms and standards (such as human rights) in some conflicts but at the same time it endorses other states that fail to comply with them is a decisive element that has damaged EU credibility in general and, more specifically, its capacity to exert a normative approach in mediation (Interview I.1; I.6; I.10). By way of example, three interviewees stated that the EU positions in the 2023 Gaza war or the prioritisation of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war over other conflicts have been signalled as elements that decisively induced African leaders' reluctance to comply with the EU mediation initiatives in conflicts such as Sudan (Interview I.1; I.6; I.10). This problem is related to the geopolitical and pragmatic turn (exemplified by the creation of the EPF) that the EU has taken since the start of the Von der Leyen commission. Under this new doctrine, EU foreign policy is guided by the pursuit of its perceived "strategic interests" even if this means undermining the norms and values that it promotes and is therefore guilty of double standards. As a result, the EU risks losing credibility as a values-based actor, which would make it impossible to implement the normative approach to mediation. Given this conundrum, this article has shown that being a values-based actor can also have positive effects on the pursuit of strategic interests as this would mean mobilising the EU's "soft power". Therefore, rather than it being a matter of impossibility to maintain strategic interests and values together, it is more about Europe having a clear strategy on what image it wants to project and being ready to commit to it.

CONCLUSION

This research has examined how the EU engages in peace mediation in sub-Saharan Africa in order to understand the role that this conflict prevention and resolution instrument plays in advancing EU interests in stability and security in the continent. To that end, the research has analysed the case studies of the Ethiopia-Tigray war and the current conflict in Sudan. The analytical framework of "multi-mediation" has been used in order to map and categorise the different mediation-related initiatives implemented by the EU in both cases. After analysing the cases and contrasting the results, there are three main concluding points. First, the EU is well equipped to be a "multi-mediator", which means being an actor capable of engaging in multi-track, multi-layered, multilateral and multi-dynamic mediation. This capacity offers the EU the potential to realise its ambition, codified in its foundational treaties, of being a force for peace. Second, despite its multiple advantages, the EU faces some structural limitations that prevent it from having the leverage and agility needed to be a lead mediator. This challenge shows that the EU needs to recalibrate its ambitions and concentrate its efforts and tools, acting not "at the table", but beyond and above the table as an assertive mediation supporter. Third, in this exact position of mediation supporter, the EU has the opportunity to transform its normative approach

If the EU mobilised its multiple resources and instruments to leverage some of its basic norms and values, through a nuanced approach guided by the local context, it could have the capacity to guarantee more sustainable peace processes and thus advance its strategic interests.

to mediation, illustrated in the 2009 and 2020 concepts, into a unique comparative advantage. If the EU mobilised its multiple resources and instruments to leverage some of its basic norms and values, through a nuanced approach guided by the local context, it could have the capacity to guarantee more sustainable peace processes and thus advance its strategic interests. Nonetheless, to fulfil this purpose the EU first needs

to clarify what image it wants to project of itself and then commit to it.

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