

WHY ANTI-PERSONNEL LANDMINES ARE NOT THE ANSWER TO EUROPE'S SECURITY CONCERNS

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The decision by several Eastern and Northern European states to withdraw from the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty poses a severe threat to international humanitarian norms. Citing renewed security threats amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine, these states mistakenly view anti-personnel mines as strategically beneficial. However, evidence consistently shows that these weapons have limited military utility, cause disproportionate civilian harm, and contradict fundamental principles of international humanitarian law, weakening Europe's moral and legal standing.

The recently announced moves by five states in Eastern and Northern Europe to withdraw from the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty and to potentially use or produce anti-personnel mines signal an unprecedented challenge to the international norm against anti-personnel landmines.

In the last few weeks, Finland and Latvia have instructed their parliaments to initiate proceedings to exit the treaty. Their decisions follow a joint declaration on 18 March by the Defence Ministers of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland recommending collective withdrawal. Poland has floated the idea of producing one million mines as a contingency measure.

Such announcements would have been unthinkable only a few months back. But this shift comes at a time when the international security landscape is under severe strain. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has reignited conventional warfare in Europe, and this has prompted many countries to reassess their defence strategies. The upsurge in the use of these weapons in the context of the Syrian

conflict, and then the acceleration in Ukraine, have alarmed the humanitarian disarmament community during the last 10 years. But perpetrators were mainly non-State Parties or non-State armed groups. The United States administration's decision under Biden last November to transfer such weapons to Ukraine, a State Party to the Mine Ban Treaty, was a thunderbolt. We knew a serious line had been crossed.

With the Trump administration's U-turn on support for Ukraine and the subsequent intensification of the Russian threat on Europe's borders, all barriers seem to be breaking down. We are talking here about five European states, members of NATO, announcing their withdrawal from a major international legal instrument, without raising any significant protest from most of the other signatories, and therefore in a silence that is tantamount to approval.

The notion that returning to indiscriminate weapons will provide strategic safety is short-sighted. The strengthening of European security must not come at the expense of international humanitarian law, through the revival of outdated weapons with a legacy of civilian harm.

Balancing military utility with consequences for civilians: a basic principle of international humanitarian law

The rationale offered by the withdrawing countries clearly has a lot to do with the need to show strong determination to protect their borders from a growing security threat. Applied to anti-personnel mines, this logic is fundamentally flawed because these weapons

offer only limited military utility, and they come with an appalling human cost.

This has been confirmed time and again by senior military experts, documented by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in a [1996 study](#) that has been updated and reaffirmed. Since then, [according to the ICRC](#), “advancements in counter-mine technologies and the rise of network-centric warfare only reinforce these conclusions.” Even the most technologically advanced mines, such as those with self-destruct or self-deactivation features, cannot guarantee civilian protection. Field evidence from previous conflicts has shown that such features often malfunction, leading to long-term land contamination. These weapons also pose risks to friendly forces and obstruct mobility on dynamic frontlines.

One puzzling fact about the arguments put forward recently by the various proponents around the military necessity of anti-personnel mines is that they do not address the scope of impact on civilians. This is a huge flaw because, according to international humanitarian law, one aspect (military advantage) has to be balanced against the other (impact on civilians or civilian objects).

Anti-personnel mines are instruments of terror that do not respect ceasefires or peace agreements. Their humanitarian consequences, whatever the type or technology used, are well-documented and overwhelmingly affect civilians. According to [Landmine Monitor](#) figures, year after year, between 70% and 85% of victims are civilians, and nearly 40% are children. These weapons remain active long after conflicts end, killing and maiming indiscriminately. Their human, social and economic impact weighs heavily and over the long term on communities living in contaminated areas, who often have no choice but to farm their land. The idea that anti-personnel mines can be used ‘responsibly’ or made safer through modern technologies is dangerously misleading.

By their very design, because they are activated by their victims, these weapons make no distinction between civilians and soldiers and are therefore in contradiction with the basic principles of international humanitarian law.

The European Union and its Member States must do their utmost to protect the integrity of the Mine Ban Treaty

The decision by 165 states to join the Mine Ban Treaty drew a red line against weapons that cause disproportionate and long-term harm. This Treaty has been hailed as a landmark achievement in humanitarian disarmament. It has contributed to a dramatic decline in the use, production, and transfer of anti-personnel mines. It has saved countless lives by reducing mine-related casualties and enabling the clearance of millions of mines from former conflict zones.

Reversing this course now would not only jeopardise civilians but also erode the legal and moral obligations embedded in international humanitarian law. What could come next? Withdrawal from other conventions, like the one on chemical weapons?

Prominent humanitarian voices have expressed their deepest concern over these decisions, and strong statements have been published by Nobel Prize winning [International Campaign to Ban Landmines](#) or by [the ICRC and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies](#). Through an initiative led by Handicap International, a group of more than 70 leading figures, including major humanitarian leaders and several former ministers and diplomats, have signed [an opinion piece](#) in *Le Monde* calling on the French government to take action.

[Norwegian Foreign Minister](#) Espen Barth Eide emphasised the importance of maintaining the global stigma against anti-personnel mines, but the lack of strong reaction by other European states is an overwhelming concern.

Most European Union (EU) Member States have translated the Treaty's obligations into national legislation, often with criminal penalties for violations. Withdrawal by one or more EU Member States creates legal and operational complications for joint defence operations and threatens the cohesion of EU security frameworks. More importantly, this trend conflicts with the EU's longstanding commitment to multilateralism, the international rules-based order, and the respect for human rights and international humanitarian law. It would undermine the EU's

credibility in advocating for the rule of law abroad. It would also endanger the progress towards a mine-free world that the EU and its Member States have supported as the world's second-biggest donor, [contributing EUR 800 million](#) to humanitarian mine action over the past six years.

The EU and its Member States must publicly reaffirm their commitment to the Mine Ban Treaty and unequivocally condemn any use of these weapons, by anyone and in any circumstances. They should engage diplomatically with the withdrawing states with a strong call on them to reconsider or reverse their decisions. No efforts should be spared to preserve the integrity of a treaty which has represented a major step forward in the protection of civilian populations.

All the opinions expressed in this publication are the sole view of the author, and do not represent the position of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) or its members.

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During her career, she has travelled extensively in crises affected countries, in particular in Africa and in the Middle East. Most of these missions focused on issues related to principled humanitarian access, gaps in the humanitarian response, protection and inclusion of most vulnerable, and protection against the threat posed by explosive weapons, with a view of providing support to operational teams.

Under her leadership, Handicap International has meaningfully contributed to major policy work related to humanitarian action, such as the United Nations Inter-Agency Standing Committee Guidelines on Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action, the International Declaration on the Impact of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas, or the impact of counter terrorism measures and sanction regimes on humanitarian action. This, in addition to her advocacy and policy work on humanitarian access in specific crisis, and her engagement in major international NGO networks, has built her robust understanding of the structure and functioning of the humanitarian system.

