



# Does the European External Action Service Represent a Model for the Challenges of Global Diplomacy?

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## Abstract

The EEAS was established to give EU foreign policy new impetus, greater coherence and efficacy. It remains to be seen whether the current organizational concept will give rise to more strategic approaches to foreign policy issues and more holistic foreign policy tools. The most immediate potential of the EEAS lies in its role in merging the broad toolbox of EU external action. The EEAS also has potential to improve vertical coordination and outreach. In the long-term, incremental changes could contribute to forming a new mindset, both when it comes to the relationship between the EU and its citizens, and to reviewing traditional models of diplomacy. The EEAS still needs recognition as a real diplomatic service both from within the Union and by other actors. Its performance, with tangible deliverables, will be key to its legitimacy and future prospects, as will be communicating the strategies and the outcomes to the wider European public.

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## Does the European External Action Service Represent a Model for the Challenges of Global Diplomacy?

by Rosa Balfour and Hanna Ojanen\*

### 1. Baptism of fire: the first steps of the European External Action Service

The EU's cacophonous and weak response to the Arab Spring put the spotlight on the birth pains of the European External Action Service (EEAS), which had only just become operational on 1 January 2011, compounded by a frustration about the lack of leadership at the highest institutional levels.

The main aim of the Lisbon Treaty's provisions for EU external policy was to improve its coherence and efficacy, making the EU's response to crises more incisive. This would be achieved by bridging the dualism between the Council and the Commission and by connecting the dots - in policy and decision-making terms - between external relations and foreign and security policy. As long as foreign policy is intergovernmental, this process remains incomplete, but the EEAS, headed by the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy/Vice President of the Commission (HR/VP), is supposed to represent the merging of these two arms that characterized EU external policy.

An assessment of the EEAS's role in giving EU foreign policy new impetus and greater coherence through institutional change would be premature. The dust still needs to settle on the new structure and some open institutional issues remain. Yet, it is already possible to see both problems and potential of this new structure.

Some of the problems may be physiological consequences of merging services and staff from different working cultures. Indeed, staffing decisions continued to be made during the first few months of the EEAS's existence, creating uncertainty about internal provisions, and the organigramme will continue to be adjusted on the basis of practice. The strains of the different working cultures coming under the same roof (metaphorically speaking, as the EEAS will not move into its new premises until the end of 2011) have been a matter of complaint and have raised questions over how former Council and Commission officials will be able to work together.

Beyond these apparently mundane issues there are deeper preoccupations. Tensions and mistrust among the member states and EU institutions have become apparent, with smaller members lamenting the lack of coordination between the Service and its

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delegations on the one hand and national foreign ministries and its embassies on the other,<sup>1</sup> while larger member states have not thrown their weight behind the new Service. The restrictive interpretation of 'budgetary neutrality', whereby the EEAS should not raise EU costs for external relations, has made the High Representative's request for a budgetary increase unlikely to be approved at a time of national austerity. The prospects for the next financial framework (2014-2020) are not rosy either.

The 2010 negotiations, however obscure to the lay observer, made the EEAS a turf for battles for power and influence among the institutions and the member states, revealing deeper trends which could undermine the EEAS's ability to meet expectations. The Commission strove to maintain its competences over external relations, and managed to secure that humanitarian and external assistance, enlargement, trade and development would remain within its remit, though the latter in coordination with the EEAS. One apparent consequence is a new acrimony between the Commission and the Service, which puts at risk the Union's ability to improve the coherence and consistency of its external action, one of the key rationales underpinning the very creation of the EEAS.<sup>2</sup>

The EEAS is supposed to serve all external relations, including those that fall under the responsibility of the High Representative, the President of the European Council (international representation and summitry), and the President of the European Commission (on external aspects of internal policies and in areas of shared competence, over which legal battles are still ongoing). De facto, not only is each institution relying on its own staff for external affairs, but the definition of the roles of these three EU leaders - ambiguous in the Lisbon Treaty - remains unclear in practice too. The risk is that the EEAS becomes not the 28th foreign ministry, but the 29th, alongside the Commission. In this context, an increasing reliance by these three leaders on their respective cabinets indicates that the permanent services of the institutions may not be sufficiently consulted.

This context might change with time and pragmatism, yet questions remain also over the way in which the EEAS was built. If its potential added value is to connect the dots between policy areas, it remains to be seen whether the current organizational concept will give rise to more strategic approaches to foreign policy issues and more holistic foreign policy tools. Linkages between geographic and thematic directorates are not explicit. More worryingly, the organization of crisis management structures, their chain of command, and relationship with other directorates are also unclear. Finally, the Lisbon Treaty's foreign policy ambitions would be defeated if the EEAS and the Commission do not work in tandem on the external dimensions of internal policies

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<sup>1</sup> For leaks of letters presented by the Austrian and Benelux foreign ministers to the Foreign Affairs Council of 23 May 2011, see Andrew Willis, "Ashton faces tough questions from EU ministers", in *EU Observer*, 23 May 2011, <http://euobserver.com/18/32370> and Nicholas Gros-Verhyde, "Améliorer la 'voix de l'Europe' hors de l'UE? La proposition autrichienne", in *Bruxelles2*, 23 May 2011, <http://www.bruxelles2.eu/politique-etrangere/service-diplomatique/ameliorer-la-voix-de-leurope-hors-de-lue-la-proposition-autrichienne.html>.

<sup>2</sup> On the negotiations over the EEAS and their political implications, see Antonio Missiroli, *Implementing the Lisbon Treaty: The External Policy Dimension*, Brugge, College of Europe, May 2010 (Bruges Political Research Papers, 14), <http://www.coleurop.be/file/content/studyprogrammes/pol/docs/wp14%20Missiroli.pdf>.

(such as migration, terrorism, energy) as well as on the external policies managed by the Commission (such as trade and development).

## 2. Opportunities for a new European foreign policy system

All this notwithstanding, the EEAS does provide a unique opportunity to create a new type of service that cuts across traditional divisions between foreign and other policies. Its most immediate potential lies in its role in merging the broad toolbox of EU external action (former Common Foreign and Security Policy, Common Security and Defence Policy, and the broad range of external relations managed by the Commission). The stronger political leadership the EEAS is supposed to provide could improve the coordination and coherence in the management and use of these tools, leading to more strategic and holistic external policies.

At a time of austerity, there is also a strong functional and economic argument for taking advantage of the EEAS to rationalize the European foreign policy system as a whole. With cuts to national ministries of up to 25%, member states could create synergies with the EEAS to ensure that the downsizing of their national diplomacies is compensated by strengthening the European one, which could take on some of the currently duplicated functions they carry out. Certain consular services (such as granting Schengen visas), political and economic reporting and intelligence, coordination of humanitarian aid, evacuation of EU citizens at times of crisis or disasters could all be undertaken by EU delegations around the world, enriched also by the knowledge and experience of national diplomats and officials who should compose one third of the EEAS.<sup>3</sup>

Moving a step further in strategic thinking, a dynamic EEAS leadership could review the EU's thematic or geographic policies, as the Arab spring would warrant, or even review the European Security Strategy, as advocated by some in the EU. A new strategy produced by the EEAS could both improve the internal atmosphere within the body (by strengthening its sense of purpose and clarifying its role) and renew the EEAS's (and HR/VP Ashton?) legitimacy, also vis-à-vis the member states. In terms of policy content, the EEAS is not expected to decide on the EU's foreign policy. However, the HR's prerogatives do include proposing initiatives, and it is the EEAS that provides the HR with the necessary expertise to do so. The EEAS is thus involved in foreign policy making. It may also influence the content of EU foreign policy indirectly and in the long term through the diplomatic work carried out by its delegations.

In the short to medium term, the EEAS also has potential to improve vertical coordination and outreach. The strengthened Delegations could have a crucial threefold role. They can provide Brussels with information and analysis of developments on the ground, contacts with local actors, and a reinforced outreach, provided they are appropriately staffed. Second, they can coordinate the work of member states' embassies (formerly a task performed by the rotating Presidency),

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Emerson *et al.*, *Upgrading the EU's Role as Global Actor. Institutions, Law and the Restructuring of European Diplomacy*, Brussels, Centre for European Policy Studies, January 2011, <http://www.ceps.eu/ceps/download/4134>.

helping Europeans 'sing from the same hymn sheet'. Finally, the Delegations can represent an authoritative interlocutor to third country governments and societies in all areas of cooperation, with positive consequences on the EU's image abroad.

The EEAS, including the delegations, should be communicating the EU's policy internationally. After all, it is the EU's diplomatic arm. In the traditional nation-state context, diplomacy is essentially a two-way process. On the one hand, it consists of representation, presenting and furthering one's own interests, and taking care of one's own citizens. On the other hand, it is about collecting information, analysing it, learning about others, and following what others do. Looked at from this perspective, the EEAS is then a service for the EU's common external policy and a channel for the representation of common views and interests, for the protection of EU citizens, and for reporting on the world for EU foreign policy-makers. It plays the same game as that played by national diplomacies, yet with new rules, whereby the EU as such takes on the role thus far reserved for nation-states. The critic will be quick to point out that common reporting from EU delegations to the EEAS and perhaps even to the member state capitals may lead to some controversy, insofar as it would free (or dilute) EU foreign policy from national considerations. Strong arguments can be made in favour of the continued need for national reporting, with each country producing its own version, as no-one else can fully understand its underlying national interests. The language regime of the service could be another point of contention: can reports in English and/or French substitute for reports in Slovak or Swedish? Critics will also point to the fact that common reporting is no small feat there where the EU does not have a common foreign policy as such. For instance, the EU has never had a common policy towards the United States. However, now that there is an EU Delegation in Washington, one that - importantly - coordinates EU member states' embassies, there is an excellent opportunity and venue for increasing the commonality in the EU's analysis on the United States. All this might not amount to a European foreign policy. Nonetheless, developing shared assessments of situations abroad is a necessary precondition a truly common policy and for a common European security culture - something that can, in turn, contribute to the Union's increased international influence.

### **3. A new link to EU citizens and a new model for global diplomacy**

Further on the long-term, incremental changes could contribute to forming a new mindset. In this respect, two larger questions loom: the potential impact of the EEAS on the relationship between the EU and its citizens, and how the EEAS might contribute to EU foreign policy decision-making.

Traditionally, European foreign policy has not been of much concrete consequence for European citizens. Most would probably have difficulties in describing EU policies in any field. At the same time, there is a generally positive attitude towards and encouragement from European publics to forge a more integrated EU foreign and security policy. In opinion polls, integration in foreign and security policy is often supported. In international crises, the EU is expected to play a role or to express a view. Communicating more and better EU foreign policy might thus be an important way in which the EEAS could strengthen the link between the Union and its citizens. Furthermore, EU Delegations in third countries might, in time, become of practical use

for EU citizens. Consular services are a case in point, should the member states start to reorganize them accordingly. But also emergency assistance provided by the Delegations through an ad hoc coordination role in evacuation would have an impact on EU citizens. Citizens' perception towards the EU might change by receiving direct help from the Union through its Delegations, rendering the abstract and distant Union somewhat closer and more understandable to them. Consequently, on these matters, citizens might place their expectations increasingly on the Union. Looking back, this is actually what early integration theories predicted would happen, or how they defined what integration is about. In Haas' terms,<sup>4</sup> the expectations and loyalties of political actors would become, step by step, oriented towards a new centre that serves their interests better than the old centres, that is, the nation state. Political actors would comprise, obviously, also citizens. Another set of actors whose expectations and loyalties might change is national diplomats and foreign ministry civil servants. From now on they have a new career possibility within the EEAS. Whether it will be an attractive one will depend not only on the internal working environment but also on the attitude of national ministries, particularly regarding the evaluation in terms of career promotion of the years spent at the EEAS.

The EEAS could also contribute to changing foreign policy decision-making. As is well known, foreign and security policy has been characterized by intergovernmentalism and led by national executives. Foreign and security policy is seldom debated in, for instance, national parliamentary election campaigns. Many see good reasons why this is so: considerations of security, secrecy and need for rapid decision-making may place this field apart from other policy areas. This isolation might not be conducive to good and coherent external relations, though. What we see in the case of the EEAS is the growing role of the European Parliament (EP). The EP should actually not play a major role here, as it does not have a formal mandate on foreign policy matters. Still, it is emerging as a player on foreign policy decision making and shaping. In the name of democratic legitimacy, it pushed through considerable changes using its budgetary powers: budget control over the EEAS implies control over its activities, including on defence matters, and thus opens the door for the EP to a field where it is formally not competent. In addition to budgetary power, regular question time and consultations prior to the approval of strategies and mandates also strengthen the role of the EP, even though they do not give it a say over long-term policy objectives or priorities. National political systems with their links between ministers and national parliaments are no longer enough to ensure democratic accountability.<sup>5</sup> A strengthened role of the EP in foreign policy making may thus add a welcome extra layer of democratic accountability.

Finally, the EEAS may represent a new model of diplomacy, as the EU represents a new type of actor somewhere between a conglomeration of states, an organization and a state. The EEAS needs recognition as a real diplomatic service in the formal sense of

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<sup>4</sup> See Ernst B. Haas, *The Uniting of Europe. Political, Social, and Economic Forces 1950-1957*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1968, p. 4-5, 16.

<sup>5</sup> See here Daniela Kietz and Nicolai von Ondarza, *Parliamentary Dawn. The New Self-Confidence of the European Parliament*, Berlin, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, August 2010 (SWP Comments 20), [http://www.swp-berlin.org/en/products/swp-comments-en/swp-aktuelle-details/article/eu\\_parliament\\_new\\_self\\_confidence.html](http://www.swp-berlin.org/en/products/swp-comments-en/swp-aktuelle-details/article/eu_parliament_new_self_confidence.html).

the word first of all from within the Union. Clearly, it is not there yet. Further, this new model of representation also requires recognition by other actors in the international system, including international organizations such as the UN and major powers such as the US and China. The search for a new type of status for the EU in the UN General Assembly is a good illustration of the political and legal problems that this may entail. The biggest challenge to ensure that it is the EEAS that will contribute to changing the rules of the international game in order to be functional - rules regarding who can enjoy the status of 'ambassador' or who can be a member of the UN - rather than allowing existing international rules to constrain the EEAS and its potential to contribute to a new model of global diplomacy.

#### 4. Conclusions

Current political conditions obscure the opportunities and potential of the EEAS. As things stand, with institutions and member states questioning the value of the service and its leadership qualities, the new body enjoys little internal legitimacy. Its performance, with tangible deliverables, will be key to its future prospects. Some deliverables are at hand. Diplomatic engagement in the Balkans and the carrot of enlargement are slowly producing some results, such as the start of the Belgrade-Prishtina talks.

Tangible results would no doubt enhance the legitimacy of the new service. Beyond practical success in the Balkans, the EEAS should engage in strategic thinking about the neighbourhood policy and regional strategies, such as the ones prepared but not made public for the Sahel or the Horn of Africa. The EEAS could play the leading role when developing or reviewing strategies, using the talent that exists within the service, with the aim of producing a compelling rethink of the EU engagement with the world in a manner that creates some unity within the EU instead of reacting to events in a disorderly fashion.

Communicating these strategies to the wider European public could bolster the EEAS's legitimacy. After all, foreign policy is no longer just about achieving results outside one's territory; it plays a role in developing a political consensus between EU member states as well as between them, EU institutions and European publics, that are increasingly sceptical about the value of the EU. European public opinion could be proven wrong were the EEAS able to deliver and to communicate its achievements.

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