policy brief

Europe's External Action Service: Ten steps towards a credible EU foreign policy

By Edward Burke

★ The EU is failing to make good use of the European External Action Service (EEAS), which was created under the Lisbon treaty. The European Commission, which has responsibility for many areas of EU policy with external implications, often treats the EEAS as an interloper.

★ EU foreign policy lacks coherence. The European Commission makes unnecessary blunders, which could be prevented through better use of EEAS diplomats in third countries. But the EEAS also requires investment to build up its capabilities.

★ The EEAS should focus on pursuing diplomacy that mirrors that of an emerging power: initially adding diplomatic weight to trade policy and consolidating the EU's influence in its own neighbourhood. Europe's diplomats can also improve the EU's development policy and crisis management capabilities.

Ten years ago the idea of creating a European diplomatic service dazzled the grand old men at the European Convention that led to the Lisbon treaty. Lofty pronouncements were made on how the new European External Action Service (EEAS) would create an integrated foreign policy for a rejuvenated Europe. To this end, the Treaty of Lisbon sought to enmesh the EEAS with other bits of the EU: while the diplomatic service is separate from the Council secretariat and the Commission, the 'high representative for foreign affairs and security policy' (HR) who heads the EEAS also serves as a vice-president of the European Commission, with lead responsibility for its external relations. In addition, the HR is president of the ministerial-level Foreign Affairs Council created under the Lisbon treaty.

Hopes were high that the EU's diplomats and other bureaucrats responsible for external policies would work in unison: in 2003, then French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier stated that the creation of the EEAS would bring about the "combining of common foreign and security policy and European security and defence policy with trade policy, external assistance, humanitarian aid, external economic policy …and every other part of the EU's agenda which touches on third countries."[1] The HR's role as the first vice-president of the Commission in theory enables him or her to instruct heads of overseas delegations, employed by the EEAS, to also lead representation of the Commission. And in Brussels, the EEAS and Commission now jointly identify priorities for EU overseas assistance in consultation with EU delegations and third country partners.

[1] *Contribution by Michel Barnier to the European Convention, Brussels, June 30th 2003.*

The full weight of expectations for an integrated European diplomacy on a global scale fell upon the shoulders of Catherine Ashton, the first HR, who was appointed at the end of 2009. Ashton has spoken of how she was expected to take on "a huge role, created without deputies and created on paper without any reference to look back on how it would actually be in

practice. On appointment I was given the Treaty – I joke that it was the Treaty and a pencil – but that was it, so everything we have done we have had to create."[2]

2 *Statement by Baroness Ashton to the House of Lords Select Committee on the European Union, June 14th 2011.*

Birth pains

The HR quickly discovered that she had little time to build up the institutional capabilities of the EEAS – it was expected to deliver an expanded, more efficient European foreign policy immediately upon becoming operational on December 1st 2010. But Ashton lacked sufficient numbers of experienced diplomats; securing secondments is a slow process. The EU institutions and the member-states identified three main sources of EEAS personnel: one third was to come from the Commission, one third from the Council secretariat, and the remaining third were to be seconded diplomats from member-state foreign ministries. Staffing levels at the EEAS will eventually grow to almost 4,000. But the recruitment of seconded national diplomats is not expected to be completed until mid-2013, weakening the service's expertise and capability in the interim. Meanwhile, some member-state diplomats complain that former Commission personnel at the EEAS lack experience in political reporting and other diplomatic duties.

Since its foundation, the EEAS has not only been deprived of resources – it receives just 0.31 per cent of the EU budget – but it has also been pulled in different directions by member-states with competing visions for its future. Management and administrative problems are widely reported, with Ashton facing criticism for "chaos in her entourage and despair among her subordinates" amid periodic calls for her to resign.[3] Abroad, many EEAS diplomats are deeply frustrated: they complain that they spend most of their time resolving administrative issues, frequently quarrelling with Commission officials, instead of engaging with and analysing their host country and liaising with member-state diplomats.

3 *The Economist, 'The Berlusconi option for Lady Ashton', February 2nd 2011.*

A siege mentality has developed in the early days of the EEAS; constant criticism has led to an erosion of morale and a prickly defensiveness among some senior EEAS officials. Their response has been to pump out good news stories to counter rumours of ineptitude. But this has only bred a degree of cynicism among member-state governments and publics alike.

The EEAS needs to change its approach. If it acknowledges its weaknesses, its real successes will sound more credible. It also needs to clarify lines of command and unblock decision-making. But much of the criticism aimed at Ashton and the EEAS is unfair. The HR is not solely to blame for the service's problems; 'Ashton-bashing' has become an easy way for member-states to vent their frustration at Europe's shrinking clout in the world.

Ashton has been written off too quickly. This brief will firstly outline her successes before going on to describe the persistent challenges that affect the HR's and the EEAS's performance. The paper concludes with a set of recommendations to improve the EEAS that can be readily implemented at little extra cost to the EU budget.[4]

4 *Although the EU Military Staff also falls under the EEAS, this paper deals only with the EEAS's civilian capacities.*

Not so bad, so far

A careful analysis of the EEAS provides a mixed assessment of Ashton's performance to date. She and the EEAS have scored some clear successes. In 2011, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the EEAS helped launch a new neighbourhood policy, under which access to EU markets, visas and money would depend on evidence of a commitment to democratic reforms (the 'more for more' approach). The EEAS's response to the Arab Spring was broadly welcomed as an overdue end to the EU's 'Arab exceptionalism' which had previously seen repressive regimes such as Ben Ali's in Tunisia gain extensive access to EU funds and markets. A new concept for the neighbourhood was widely welcomed, even if some complain that its implementation lacked consistency.

The HR has also done well in establishing a new 'crisis management board' (which integrates crisis response planning among various bits of the EU), and in introducing the concept of 'a crisis platform' to respond to specific conflicts or natural disasters. In addition she has created high-level task forces to deal with specific third country governments in the European neighbourhood. These task forces bring together senior personnel from the EEAS, Commission, European Investment Bank (EIB), European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), Union for the Mediterranean and other agencies in a forum for drafting assistance proposals, monitoring progress and solving problems with foreign partners. Ashton pushed hard, and won, an expansion of the mandate of the EBRD to allow it to spend up to €2.5 billion annually in the southern Mediterranean. Following EU prompting, the EIB has also increased funding to the region.[5]

5 *EBRD, 'The EBRD's activities in the southern and eastern Mediterranean region', 2012.*

The 2011 Comprehensive Approach to Sudan and the Strategy for the Horn of Africa are also worthy attempts by the HR to establish better institutional coherence between (and within) the EEAS, the Commission and member-states. The short-term security measures taken to deal with escalating problems of terrorism, insurgency and piracy in the region (primarily through a naval mission, Atalanta)

and a security sector training mission (the EU Training Mission in Somalia), are now being matched by long-term thinking on how to resolve political and socio-economic problems at the root of conflict. The EEAS proposed – and member-states approved– a major increase in EU financial support for the African Union Mission Somalia (AMISOM). As of June 2012, AMISOM, along with Somali troops, has been steadily pushing the rebel extremist al-Shabaab movement away from main population centres. The EU's first 'proxy war' is going well.[6]

6 *The Guardian, 'Al-Shabaab pushed back in Somalia by African peacekeepers', June 15th 2012.*

More recently, Ashton has been widely praised for her role in chairing international talks on Iran's nuclear programme; one of the most complex and urgent challenges to international security. Her stewardship of these difficult negotiations has highlighted a diplomatic capability within the EEAS that many had hastily thrown into question. In recent months, the HR has also presided over the introduction of complex and robust sanctions that have severely hurt Iranian and Syrian interests.

In Brussels, despite predictable criticism from eurosceptic representatives, the HR has also done a good job at building relations with the European Parliament – she is responsive to its queries and recommendations and includes parliamentarians in initiatives to improve relations in the neighbourhood and beyond. In turn, influential members of the Parliament's foreign affairs committee have called for a significant increase in funding for the EEAS.

Relations with the member-states

But recent successes should not be overstated; several major problems continue to plague EU diplomacy. The EEAS needs to address its internal weaknesses, including a confusing chain of command. Moreover, Europe's diplomats lack a clear set of priorities from member-states. A rhetorical shift to a more conditional approach in the neighbourhood is not yet matched by consistent action. And the Commission frequently ignores or undermines the EEAS, frustrating those who wish to see the service lead a comprehensive European foreign policy that integrates diplomacy with trade, energy and other areas of Commission competence. Member-states need to address both the EEAS's fuzzy objectives and internal strife in Brussels if the EU's new diplomatic corps is to recover from its uncertain start.

Member-states have differing views of what they want the EEAS to be. Some national governments, such as those of the Benelux countries, see the EEAS as progressively replacing national diplomatic services. Others, like the UK, see it as a limited tool to complement existing areas of EU competence such as trade diplomacy or relations with countries in the EU's neighbourhood.

The Lisbon treaty says that member-states shall ensure the "convergence of their actions" internationally. In theory, they should be narrowing their differences, allowing the EEAS to co-ordinate their actions and negotiate widely on their behalf. In practice, the EEAS lacks the means, and member-states the will, to enforce this provision. Indeed, some countries spend a considerable amount of time telling the EEAS what not to do: the UK was quick to protest in 2011 when it felt that the EEAS was speaking and acting on areas outside its competence at the UN and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

The EEAS will only be effective in a few parts of the world: its resources, and therefore its reach, are limited. At the end of 2011 the EEAS employed 3,267 people – not much more than the number of staff at the Danish ministry of foreign affairs, or approximately a thousand less than the Commission's directorate-general for development and co-operation (EuropeAid). The EEAS's budget is just under €500 million, about the size of the defence budget of Slovenia.[7] Despite strong support from the European Parliament for a larger budget, member-states are more likely to grumble about EEAS expenditure, especially in response to domestic headline-grabbers like salaries,[8] than to give it more money.

7 *OECD, 'European Union: Development assistance committee peer review 2012', February 2012; Daniel Keohane, 'The EU's 'ludicrous' foreign service budget', FRIDE, April 26th 2012.*

8 *The Daily Telegraph, 'Baroness Ashton demands extra £23 million to run the EU foreign service', April 12th 2012.*

The HR is aware of the limited nature of the resources at her disposal. She has tried to increase the EEAS's capabilities by asking EU foreign ministers or senior national diplomats to take on ad hoc envoy duties as issues or negotiations arise, and by appointing senior member-state diplomats as EU special representatives (EUSRs). But this solution carries risks of its own. These representatives often have vague terms of reference and are parachuted in over senior full-time EEAS diplomats, muddling lines of authority and communication. A case in point is the southern Mediterranean, where heads of the delegation and officials in Brussels are unsure of the exact authority and role of the recently appointed EUSR for the region, Bernardino León, who frequently makes promises to EU partners that have not been cleared by the EEAS or the Commission. Confusing matters further, under the Polish Presidency in the second half of 2011, Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski also acted as an EU envoy on neighbourhood issues, including the southern Mediterranean. Member-states have been reluctant to place the EUSRs' funds and personnel under the main EEAS budget, preferring to keep the EUSRs in a semi-autonomous position so that the capitals can exercise more influence.

Ashton also inherited a muddled system in which some military or civilian heads of EU common security and defence policy (CSDP) missions

sometimes see themselves as outside the authority of EU heads of delegations – including on political matters. They report to the HR only through direct military channels or through the 'civilian planning and conduct capability' (an EEAS agency set up to manage police and rule of law missions). Meanwhile, member-states have a habit of creating CSDP missions and then failing to send sufficient numbers of military, police and civilian personnel: in late 2010, the EU police mission in Afghanistan suffered from vacancies of almost a quarter of the 400 personnel identified as a minimum requirement to achieve the mission's aims.

The large member-states have long imposed limits on the EU's political reach: for years, they have been unwilling to delegate responsibility to the EU for most of their diplomatic relations with major powers such as the United States or the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India or China). The biggest EU countries enjoy excellent access to the political and business elites in these countries, and do not want to sacrifice this privileged position for a unified European foreign policy. Additionally, France and the UK will not contemplate the surrender of their permanent membership status at the UN Security Council in favour of a single EU representation. Even Germany prefers to lobby for its own seat on an expanded Security Council than for a single EU seat. Meanwhile, national governments disagree on whether the EEAS should take on a consular role.

A turf war with the Commission?

Ideally, the European Union's diplomacy should, in the words of the HR, "bring together economics and politics".[9] In trade negotiations in particular, a wider appreciation of political background and different cultures can often prove vital, which is why the best trade diplomacy requires skilled diplomats as well as technocrats. Conversely, where trade negotiators fail to understand their interlocutors' motives and feelings, trouble follows.

[9] Address by HR/VP Lady Ashton at the seminar 'The EU and Brazil in the world', February 8th 2012.

At the Doha Round of World Trade Organisation talks in 2008, EU officials underestimated the resistance of Brazil, India and others to a deal on reducing agricultural subsidies, leaving the EU's trade and agriculture commissioners looking surprised and defensive.[10] Similarly, in September 2010, the EU failed to foresee that its bid to gain speaking rights at the UN General Assembly – the ability to present proposals, amendments, and participate in the General Assembly, its committees and working groups – would run into opposition from traditional allies such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand. Neither was the EU aware until the last moment that the Caribbean Community, an important EU development and trade partner, would lead the opposition to its proposals.

[10] Commissioner Mariann Fischer Boel, 'Statement on the failure of the Doha round of the WTO', European Commission, July 2008.

The EEAS was supposed to work with the Commission (which conducts trade negotiations at the World Trade Organisation and with bilateral partners) specifically to avoid similar misunderstandings in the future, but they have found co-operation difficult. Brussels-based diplomats from important EU partner countries complain that there is no truly common approach from Brussels towards managing the EU's foreign relations. They wonder aloud why they are obliged to repeat their views on the same issues to two different sets of officials from the EEAS and Commission.

Some EU officials complain that the co-ordination of Europe's external relations has become even more difficult than it was before the Lisbon treaty; relations with the former Commission directorate-general for external relations were more straightforward. But such criticism is premature: the EEAS is barely a year and a half old, and teething problems are to be expected as it moves towards the 'integrated diplomacy' model that Ashton has articulated. It took more than a year to agree working arrangements between the EEAS and the Commission on programming development aid, which give the EEAS a role in identifying strategic priorities for EU development assistance. However, EEAS-Commission co-operation on foreign policy needs to be tightened further, including in the area of development aid.

EEAS diplomats on the ground are in a prime position to sound a warning when EU aid is in danger of being abused by corrupt local actors or has other unintended consequences. Without such political insight, some of the EU's development assistance goes to waste. But the Commission and some senior EEAS officials resist a close link between diplomats and aid officials, arguing that development assistance and humanitarian aid must not become tools of foreign policy. They are right that a certain amount of aid should always be distributed on the basis of need as opposed to EU strategic interests. But this does not diminish the need to involve EU diplomats in monitoring the distribution of aid at all times; clear-eyed political analysis of recipient countries can guard against waste and abuse. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the EU institutions fail to measure the full impact of its €10 billion annual development assistance spending. The OECD reports that "a focus on financial accountability, while crucial, does not provide stakeholders with evidence on how EU development co-operation is achieving results".[11] This is in great part because the EU understands too little about the countries that receive its aid. Joint analysis between the EEAS and the

[11] OECD, 'European Union: Development assistance committee peer review 2012', February 2012.

Commission on the impact of development programmes remains an ad hoc occurrence rather than a normal procedure.

Poor EEAS-Commission relations also leave the EU vulnerable to committing occasional blunders in its new, more conditional, approach in the neighbourhood. In 2011, the HR and the Commission delivered a special funding programme aimed at rewarding political reform – 'Support for partnership reform and inclusive growth' (SPRING) – with a budget of €350 million for 2011 and 2012. In April 2012, the Commission president, José Manuel Barroso, announced a package of SPRING funding for Jordan around the same time as the kingdom introduced a widely criticised electoral law (the country's prime minister resigned in frustration at King Abdullah's failure to honour reform commitments).[12] In early 2012 the EU also announced that it would further liberalise trade and travel with Azerbaijan, even though the country's poor human rights record shows no signs of improvement. Human Rights Watch criticised the EU for "refusing to condition their engagement on concrete human rights improvements."[13]

12 European Commission, statement by President Barroso following his meeting with King Abdullah II of Jordan, April 17th 2012.

13 Human Rights Watch, 'World report 2012: Azerbaijan', 2012.

In 2011, the European Council complained that Commission aid programmes, such as those under the European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument, did not sufficiently reflect the strategic priorities identified by member-states and EEAS diplomats. Moreover, the length of time it took to design and implement Commission aid programmes often "did not suit the fast-changing and conflict-affected environment" of several countries in Europe's neighbourhood.[14]

14 Council conclusions, May 13th 2011.

Commission officials admit that they do not like being 'second-guessed' or audited by EEAS diplomats on the political circumstances or possible negative effects of development programmes, for three reasons: firstly, the Commission believes that it has the capacity to manage and report on development programmes on its own; secondly, officials fear the 'politicisation' of aid based on criteria other than poverty reduction; and thirdly, the Commission does not believe the EEAS to be capable of providing original policy insights.

Many EEAS officials are not experienced diplomats but were previously Commission employees – their former colleagues do not wish to submit to guidance from individuals who have essentially the same expertise. Even in the region where the EU has most influence, in its eastern and southern neighbourhood, Commission officials believe that they are more experienced and capable of taking the lead on questions of policy. For example, in 2011 Commission officials claimed that they were responsible for 90 per cent of policy documents in the neighbourhood, while the EEAS only played a peripheral role.

Commission complaints that the EEAS does not bring much 'added value' to its work are unfair. It is true that there are a number of EEAS personnel who do not possess much diplomatic experience. But with the right reforms, recruitment and training the EEAS can improve its performance. Many EEAS diplomats already do an excellent job. Michele Cervone, a permanently contracted EEAS diplomat and former head of the EU delegation in Yemen, is a case in point. Throughout 2011 and early 2012, he played a key role in the Yemeni transition process, demonstrating the value of an effective collaboration between the EEAS and member-state diplomats in a country experiencing conflict.

Similarly, in February 2012 EEAS diplomats used EU leverage over Serbia and Kosovo – notably the prospect of accession talks with Belgrade – as a means of reducing tensions and easing the movement of people and goods. Their efforts could not have succeeded without strong co-operation with relevant officials from the Commission. Collaboration works well when common views exist between the Commission and the EEAS, underlining the value of skilled diplomats to realising EU objectives. Problems tend to emerge when differences of opinion lead to questions over who is really in charge of EU foreign policy.

Presently, the influence of the HR and the EEAS over the Commission is based more on collegial co-operation than executive authority. Commissioners with responsibility for energy, climate action and trade do not believe that they should defer to Ashton's guidance on the external aspects of their responsibilities. Others do see value in working closely with Ashton and the EEAS. For instance, there is a relatively good working relationship between the HR and the commissioner for enlargement and neighbourhood policy, Štefan Füle. Meanwhile, some in the Commission suggest that the role of Ashton and the EEAS should be limited to those diplomatic and crisis management duties previously undertaken by Javier Solana – a view that is contrary to the Lisbon treaty.

In some areas of the EU's external relations, Ashton has less power than that enjoyed by the former commissioner for external relations, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, before the amalgamation of the latter's post with that of HR under the Lisbon treaty. The directorate-general for external relations was not transferred wholly to the EEAS. Instead, some assets were kept by the Commission, including the international climate negotiation unit that was transferred to the new directorate-general for climate action. Similarly, Ferrero-Waldner was able to draw upon more trade and energy experts to

assist her in developing a broad diplomatic agenda than is the case in the EEAS under Ashton. Meanwhile the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) in Paris, although formally a part of the EU system, remains under-utilised – and does not play a major role in the making of EU foreign policy.

EEAS diplomats complain that the HR takes too long to solve institutional problems that emerge in Brussels. Due to her hectic travel schedule, the HR frequently misses key meetings dealing with the Commission's external relations. Travel is of course an essential part of her job. But her long absences highlight the need for a deputy with sufficient political clout to take her place when she is out of Brussels.

How to improve the EEAS: Staffing and structure

A significant increase in funding for the EEAS is unlikely in the near future, due to Europe's economic crisis. But the EEAS could improve its use of existing resources and its relationship with the Commission. The internal structure of the EEAS is a good place to start.

★ Create a deputy HR post

A deputy HR should be appointed to improve relations between the EEAS and the Commission. Although their failure to specify such a position in the Lisbon treaty text was a mistake, member-states should look at ways of appointing a European statesman or stateswoman to serve as a deputy HR, without having to wait for another EU treaty – for example by appointing a 'super' EUSR with a general foreign policy mandate. A deputy HR should have specific responsibility for managing operational issues in Brussels and Europe, allowing the HR to deal with more strategic affairs and maintain her travel schedule. Essentially, a deputy HR would be responsible for ensuring 'the consistency of the Union's external action' as originally envisaged under the Lisbon treaty. Rather than a conventional diplomat, an appointee should have political clout among Europe's leaders. A candidate such as the current Finnish Minister for Europe, Alexander Stubb, comes to mind.

★ Appoint an EEAS advisory board

The EU should consider appointing an EEAS advisory board to provide guidance, monitor and evaluate the EEAS's progress and needs. Its members should be respected former foreign ministers, diplomats and experts. The board would report annually to the European Council on EEAS progress and challenges – making recommendations to the member-states and the Commission. The board would have no executive powers and would be limited to advisory duties.

★ Integrate the EUISS as a research unit within the EEAS

The EUISS is often regarded within the EU system as 'just another think-tank' rather than a critical tool of the HR and the EEAS to research and analyse current and future EU policies. The EUISS should be moved from its location in Paris and integrated – along with its current budget – as a specific policy research unit under the EEAS's Strategic Planning Division. Then it could be more responsive to the HR's evolving needs for analysis and deeper thinking.

★ Reduce the number of EUSRs and codify lines of authority

Ashton and national governments should resist the temptation to appoint over-lapping EUSRs with vague terms of reference. There are occasional instances where an EUSR or EU envoy appointment is necessary – such as a badly-needed deputy HR position with political clout. But the long-term interest in building an effective and cohesive cadre of European diplomats should outweigh the immediate appeal of letting national foreign ministries take control of diplomatic tasks on the EEAS's behalf. The EEAS's institutional morale cannot be developed if its diplomats are regularly pushed aside on issues deemed to be of real importance by member-state foreign ministers and diplomats. The HR should focus on rewarding those diplomats in the EEAS who perform their political functions well and learn from their success. Member-states should also recognise that EU foreign policy coherence will be better served if personnel and budgets assigned to EUSRs are fully integrated within the EEAS.

Clearer guidelines should be drawn up on the exact authority and reporting obligations between EUSRs, EEAS managing directors, and the heads of EU delegations and CSDP missions operating in the same space. CSDP missions should be represented by resident EEAS heads of delegation on all political questions – similar to the approach adopted by the UN in its division of labour between political affairs and peacekeeping operations.

★ Increase training for EEAS diplomats

A number of member-state foreign ministries permit their diplomats to undertake years of language and cultural training before taking up postings overseas. The EU should use a similar approach; the EEAS's training budget line should be increased from the paltry €1.2 million allocated in 2012, focusing particularly on sorely needed non-European languages such as Arabic.

★ Encourage frank, realistic EEAS political reporting

Member-states should encourage the EEAS to be more frank and insightful in its political reporting. When EEAS diplomats 'play it safe' in political reports, their views often merely reflect what member-states already

know; they also risk failing to alert the EU to the possibility that its policies may not be working as desired. It is far better to sound the alarm from within than be second-guessed and criticised from the outside.

How to improve the EEAS: Narrow its focus

The HR needs to 'under-promise and over-deliver'– to find a way to narrow her priorities in order to show that the EEAS is effective. She should focus the EEAS's efforts on those areas of foreign policy where the EU has unquestioned competence through treaties and not engage in 'mission creep' that may antagonise some member-states. Only when the EEAS is seen to meet its objectives consistently will member-states allocate it more resources and responsibilities for the conduct of their foreign policy. Member-states also need to recognise the limitations of what the EEAS can do with its current level of resources – including stopping demands for the EEAS to play a consular role around the world.

There are four main areas in which the EEAS can readily add value to EU foreign policy: first, provide a political complement to trade negotiations. Second, give a greater priority to the European neighbourhood policy (ENP); third, provide political context on the allocation and impact of EU development funds; and fourth, improve the performance of CSDP missions (with an emphasis on civilian police and rule of law missions such as those in place in Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo).

★ Integrate EEAS diplomats in trade negotiations

Local networking, personal rapport with interlocutors, and political and cultural understanding of partner countries can give the EU an edge in trade negotiations. Commission officials, who are based primarily in Brussels, are not well placed to build this type of influence; the EEAS should be responsible for putting trade negotiations within a political and cultural context. An integrated EEAS-Commission approach to trade diplomacy would also help the EU make better use of its strategic partnerships with big powers around the globe – these are mainly trade-orientated but may offer opportunities for leverage on issues of political interest (expanding the 'more for more' concept). Joint analysis and reporting on trade negotiations should become the norm rather than the exception.

★ Make the EU's neighbourhood policy more consistent

The EU's implementation of a new approach to the neighbourhood will take considerable diplomatic resources and skill. Ashton is right to urge caution in not shutting the door on countries which are moving towards reform, even if from a low base. But there is a fine line between slow reformer and repressive laggard. The EU needs the political wisdom to know the difference. The EU should urgently agree a set of political reform criteria for each country that would make its 'more for more' rhetoric a practical reality. It should consolidate and reinforce special funding mechanisms such as SPRING around those few countries that are genuine reformers and hold them up as an example of a successful partnership.

★ Use the EEAS to improve the EU's delivery of aid

The EU should try to develop more joint EEAS-Commission analysis on the effect of development programmes. Reports should include a particular emphasis on the local political context and sustainability of aid within the recipient country – guarding against the creation of aid-dependent monopolies and corruption. The EEAS is well-placed to take a policy lead in the EU on getting donors and recipients alike to finally implement guidelines on aid effectiveness, such as those agreed under the OECD's Paris Declaration and Accra Agenda for Action.

The EEAS can also get political buy-in from member-states on what a new international framework for development will look like after the Millennium Development Goals expire in 2015. In turn, the Commission also needs to be more responsive to requests from the EEAS for development assistance to help stabilise countries or regions that are important for European security.

★ Improve crisis management capabilities

Member-states should permit the HR to contract and train a centralised pool of recently retired police personnel and civilian experts, as opposed to relying on often erratic secondments of serving police officers, judges and others by member-states. The UK provides a model of how to do so, both through the Foreign Office's contracting of recently retired police officers to serve in places such as Afghanistan, and the maintenance and training of a pool of rapidly deployable civilian experts.

Conclusion: Setting a realistic course for the EEAS

US Senator Robert F Kennedy famously argued that foreign and security policy must always be rooted in an understanding of local politics and culture: "Political first, political last, political always."[15] All areas of EU policy – including trade, development and energy – are better served when general objectives are complemented by a wider understanding of the political and social dimensions of the third countries with which the EU is engaged. Many legislators in the world's most dynamic democracies outside Europe, including Brazil, Japan, India and the US, know little about how the EU works and the advantages of building partnerships with EU institutions. In the past the Commission has tended to

15 Senator Robert F Kennedy, as quoted in Arthur M Schlesinger Jr, 'Robert Kennedy and his Times', Harcourt, 2002.

speak primarily to civil servants in partner countries rather than to political representatives. And member-state governments and diplomats will not always speak up for the EU institutions, concentrating instead on pursuing narrow national agendas.

Only a European cadre of diplomats can understand, cajole, pre-empt and persuade on behalf of the European institutions. Member-states and the Commission should fully embrace that logic and not begrudge empowering and paying for the EEAS. However, they should equally expect value for money – a trusted advisory board would do a lot to separate fact from fiction with respect to the EEAS's performance.

Much patience is still required. Despite the influx of seconded national diplomats, many member-state foreign ministries do not believe that the EEAS can match their own standards of political reporting and negotiation. For the next five years or so the EEAS needs to pay more attention to building up its basic skills and structures. Member-states and the European Parliament should enable the EEAS to spend a commensurate amount of its budget and time on training that will foster an improved standard. Increased resources for training would also ease residual doubts in the Commission over the real value-added provided by the EEAS to the EU's external relations.

National governments should resist the temptation to take charge of important issues as they see fit, at the expense of the EEAS. Member-states and the European Parliament should also come to the EEAS's assistance to ensure that it has the necessary clout with the Commission to meet its objectives. Isolating Ashton by portraying her as the architect of all the EEAS's woes is neither constructive nor accurate.

Instead, member-states and the European Parliament should take more responsibility for the EEAS's structural development, requesting regular updates on skills shortages, lines of authority, budget problems, relations with the Commission and the Parliament. In the end the EEAS's success or failure will largely depend on whether member-states and Europe's institutions choose to make their criticism constructive.

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