

Location, Location, Location: Situating the European External Action Service

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No Comment



Has Lisbon presented the EU with the necessary toolkit to close the gap between expectations and capabilities? Yes and no. The Treaty does little to simplify or clarify the institutional obfuscations of Brussels. It does not whittle down the layers of decision-making, or open up new routes by which to better engage with the Commission or the Parliament. And it remains to be seen whether the entire edifice of the EU will be made any more relevant to the daily lives of Europeans. Ironically however, in the area of foreign policy – the issue most likely to raise the hackles of Member States because it impinges upon their sovereign prerogative – the Treaty’s innovations have prompted little controversy. Indeed, the buzz on the proverbial boulevard is of little else than who will fill the new high-powered seats of President of the EU Council and High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs. Here, the Lisbon Treaty may at last be able to bridge the gap between potential and competence.

The EU’s own external affairs mirror the complicated nature of the EU itself. Divided areas of authority between Member States and the institutions produce instances of principles that are long on procedure but frequently short on substance. Nevertheless, the EU has since the first ‘big’ treaty of Maastricht in 1993, developed into a real, if not always robust regional actor. It is now a major international player in a number of strategic areas, including trade humanitarian aid, peace-keeping and climate change. Its own in-house foreign policy of enlargement, and its traditional links of development with former *domaine privé* in Africa, the Caribbean and Pacific have also extended its influence considerably. This is due to organisational vision on the part of the Council, and the institutional clout of the European Commission.

For a complex, multi-tier actor like the EU, the ability to act in concert on the world stage depends to a large extent upon how flexible the idea of foreign policy is. The EU is certainly capable of constructing a series of generic guidelines by which it can regulate and expand its relationship with neighbours near and far. However, when pushed by external circumstances into reactively producing a coherent position, the EU is less good. All too frequently, the foreign policy fabric of the EU unravels, with gaps emerging between the Commission and the Council, or between one of the institutions and the Member States, just at the time when a foreign issue – or audience – most requires EU unity.

Unlike its Member States, EU foreign policies are an aggregate feature, an example of summative diplomacy, which is the function of the EU’s own cumulative composition. However, like its constituent national units, the EU requires dedicated mechanisms, personnel and vision to construct and sustain a foreign policy by which to define and defend itself. With the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty come a host of new foreign policy ‘add-ons’, helping to upgrade the EU in its quest for greater international ‘actorness’. The time is certainly right. Recent

opinion polls suggest that a majority of Europeans too feel strong about a clearer role for the EU, provided that Lisbon helps streamline its actions, rather than diffusing its impact.

Whilst the European media is full of stories about the new President of the European Council and the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs, the third development of an EU Ministry of Foreign Affairs appears to have fallen off the radar, despite fierce turf wars erupting across Brussels as to its proper role. The European External Action Service (EEAS) is designed to comprise a future EU diplomatic corps. The EEAS is ambiguously outlined in the Lisbon Treaty, and while not designed to replace the mechanisms of bilateral diplomacy, it certainly provides an additional instrument by which the EU can coalesce around a given issue area. This has the benefit of increasing its ability to present a united front to external audiences, and the drawback of appearing to critics to transform the EU into a more federated entity.

Divisions have arisen however as to the role of the EEAS. The current Swedish Presidency views the EEAS as an entity separate from the Council of Ministers and the Commission, a service provider responsible solely to the new High Representative. The European Parliament however – as witnessed by its rushed resolution of 22 October – is keen to stake its claim on the EEAS as an entity situated within the shadow of the Commission, from where the EP can extend its ability to scrutinize its various doings and spendings. The Commission will clearly have much to say about integrating the EEAS into its own administrative structure, particularly in relation to the current responsibilities of DG Relex, TREN and Enlargement.

Despite the excellent auditing work of the European Parliament in bringing the mis-managed and unwieldy European Commission to heel in 1999, the EEAS need not be situated within the institutional structure of the Commission simply because it would come under Parliamentary scrutiny. Indeed, if comprised of young, merit-based European citizens keen on directing the new Lisbon-ified EU, the EEAS should be the most democratic and representative of the EU's institutions, and thus the least in need of such oversight. Instead, the EEAS should remain an autonomous entity, serving the CFSP High Representative. The DGs with responsibility for various international affairs are still struggling to keep inter-DG warfare to a minimum, and do not need the added complication of yet another foreign policy forum. The CFSP High Rep however, needs skilled researchers, analysts, desk officers and budding diplomats capable of streamlining the data produced by the Commission and properly transforming it into new patterns of EU action.

The EU is not a classic foreign policy player, and many of its foreign policy areas, from enlargement to climate change do not fit the classic diplomatic mould. The portfolio-approach to the DGs has at least helped keep these separate; whilst the Council and Parliament attempts to find cross-issue methods to keep them connected. The EEAS can serve the EU best in two ways. As an 'in-house service provider', the EEAS should act as a repository that consolidates positions on foreign policy between the national capitals and the institutions. Abroad, it can provide a visible diplomatic presence, strengthening the Union's presence in key theatres around the world. The EEAS should provide the content of EU foreign policy, whilst the High Representative and Council President provide the form. Together, the two can work to define, and then advance the EU's common foreign policy goals. Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn had it right in stressing 'the wide range of policy instruments at our disposal' as a result of Lisbon, in which the EEAS operates as 'the engine of our smart

power'. The EEAS stands the best chance of becoming a true catalyst for EU foreign policy if it is least institutionally hamstrung (EurActive, 22 October, 2009).