

Learning to dance to the same tune? The European External Action Service and National Diplomacies

Rosa Balfour and Kristi Raik

2013 will be a crucial year for strengthening the European External Action Service (EEAS) and its capacity to add value to European diplomacy. In mid-2013, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR), Catherine Ashton, is due to present a Review of the first two-and-a-half-years of the EEAS. The review process should be seen as an opportunity to enhance member states' commitment to the Service and to strengthen the EU's ability to make better use of its unique foreign policy resources and tools. It is essential for the legitimacy and effectiveness of European diplomacy to ensure that the EEAS interacts smoothly with national foreign services.

The review will be prepared in a difficult context, with European foreign policy at a complicated crossroads. The European model is being challenged by changing patterns of global power and interdependence, and the economic crisis is producing a backlash over the integration project. National foreign services are under the twin pressures of the economic crisis and an overall decline in the importance of traditional diplomacy, while the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty and the creation of the EEAS are supposed to stimulate an internal logic towards more EU integration and burden-sharing in foreign policy.

The EU has been playing an important role in global governance on issues like human rights, multilateral trade liberalisation and climate change. Its unique policy toolbox, size and experience should be harnessed to develop multi-dimensional approaches to complex global challenges in areas such as crisis management, energy and migration. In the EU's institutional structures, responsibilities in these areas fall partly under the EEAS and partly under the European Commission. One of the big challenges of the review is to improve the relationship and strengthen coordination between the EEAS and the Commission, which has been bad enough for some insiders to label 'a new Berlin Wall'. The HR has had little time to wear her second hat as vice-president of the Commission, responsible for coordinating the EU executive's share of the Union's external relations. However, the EEAS needs to be able to draw on the whole range of the EU's resources and instruments in defining its positions and actions on global affairs.

For member states big and small, the EU remains an indispensable power multiplier, provided that member states choose to act together – which they often do not. The economic crisis has had contradictory impacts on common foreign policy. The crisis and the ensuing rise of nationalism and increased confrontation within the EU have undermined trust among member states. Furthermore, the crisis has raised questions regarding Europe's global role and agenda by eroding the attraction and normative ground of the EU as an international actor.

On the other hand, by accelerating the decline of Europe's weight in global politics, the crisis accentuates the need for common action. The economic crisis is also forcing the foreign services of most member states to make savings and rationalise their activity, which pushes them to share burdens and seek greater synergies with partner countries and the EEAS.

In this context, the EEAS' network of 140 EU delegations across the globe is proving to be of major added value to member states. Only the five largest EU countries have more embassies abroad than the EU itself. The delegations have already enhanced the importance of the EU framework for national diplomats on the ground. They have taken on

a new role in coordinating member states' activities and they represent the whole range of EU policies vis-à-vis third countries. There is growing demand among member states for reporting from EU delegations. Indeed, there is much scope for increased burden-sharing: national foreign services could in future rely more heavily on general reporting from EU delegations, leaving them free to focus national diplomatic reporting on selected national priorities and sensitivities. There is also much potential for co-location of diplomatic missions, for placing national 'laptop diplomats' on the premises of EU delegations, and for member states to use the help of EU delegations in locations where they lack national representation. Member states should systematically explore ways to make use of EU delegations and take into account the EEAS when planning their national diplomatic networks. So far, the cuts made by foreign services have not been linked to the existence of the EEAS, but have followed purely national considerations.

In order to be successful, the EEAS needs to increase member states' trust and sense of ownership of the Service. Many smaller countries have criticised the EEAS and the HR for lack of transparency and for being too receptive to the influence of the biggest three member states. The EEAS is yet to prove that it is there to serve the European interest rather than the interests of the most influential member states. One way to involve member states in the EEAS is to bear in mind the principle that one third of its staff should comprise national diplomats. The EEAS is now close to reaching this goal. It has managed to recruit the best and brightest European diplomats. But more effort is needed in terms of regular consultation and information-sharing between the EEAS and national foreign ministries.

Another challenge facing the new Service lies in ensuring that it becomes a true policy entrepreneur and begins to actively use its right of initiative. Lack of leadership has been a major problem of EU foreign policy in recent years. Member states have been reluctant to allow the EEAS to take the lead, but on the other hand the EEAS and the HR have shown little initiative, often preferring to limit their activity to non-controversial issues. The EEAS should take the lead in strategic planning of the EU's external relations, pulling together the input of member states and other institutions and turning it into common policy.

The EEAS needs to be at the centre of an emerging EU system of diplomacy, shaping it and not just being shaped by others, and it must create a new sense of unity. In order to equip European foreign policy for the 21st Century, it has to forge together EU and national elements. The EEAS and national diplomacies have yet to find a *modus vivendi* and a new division of labour fit for this purpose.

Rosa Balfour is Senior Policy Analyst and Head of the Europe in the World Programme at the European Policy Centre; Kristi Raik is Researcher at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs. This Commentary draws on a joint research project conducted by the EPC and the Finnish Institute of International Affairs on 'The European External Action Service and National Diplomacies'. It summarises the two authors' report "Equipping the European Union for the 21st century: National diplomacies, the European External Action Service and the making of EU foreign policy".