



Now We Are One... A Rough Start for the EEAS

Dr Simon Duke, Professor, EIPA Maastricht

25

The first year of the European External Action Service (EEAS) has already elicited much comment, both internally and externally. This contribution briefly reviews the nature of this commentary and then suggests some possible short-term 'wins' for the Service, as well as some challenges that will require a longer-term perspective. The main shorter-term issue considers the need to create stronger linkages and priorities between existing strategies and to start the difficult process of melding a common mindset within the Service. The longer-term challenges revolve around recruitment, balance and resources. The latter is particularly important in order to enable the delegations to assume their full roles. The barrage of criticism that greeted the EEAS's first birthday is also a commentary on how critical the role of the Service is to achieving the core goals of the Lisbon Treaty in external relations; namely, to aim towards more coherence, effectiveness and visibility.

Introduction

Alan Milne is perhaps best known for creating Winnie the Pooh. He was also a fine poet and playwright. One of his better-known poems is 'Now We Are Six' which commences, 'When I was one, I had just begun. When I was two, I was nearly new'. This is particularly appropriate when applied to the European External Action Service (EEAS), which, whatever its merits and demerits, is still very young and like Milne's poem, real maturity will take several more years. This contribution will review the various reactions to the Service's first year and will consider the implications for the second year of the EEAS, during which the first formal review of the functioning of the Service is due. Although much of the focus is on the forthcoming review, it is important to be sanguine about what may be accomplished in the shorter term and what should be considered for the longer term, covering the next five years or so.

The EEAS was conceived of as a quasi *corps diplomatique* in the making for the European-level of diplomacy. The basic function of the EEAS, going back to the Convention on the Future of Europe, was to help enhance the coherence, effectiveness and visibility of the EU's external actions. The emergence of the Service was difficult and fraught with not only disagreements but inevitable compromise. The resulting birth was not that of an institution but a *sui generis* body with a vague mandate and an even more awkward initial composition, comprising former officials of the Commission's Directorate General for External Relations, the Council Secretariat General and more substantial numbers of national diplomats. The inherent ambiguities of the Service, its place in the EU institutional architecture as a 'Service' and the enormous expectations surrounding the Service and its head, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Commission Vice President (HR/VP), perhaps created excessive expectations that now risk being counter-balanced by undue pessimism a year later.

Navel-gazing

The first anniversary of the EEAS was greeted with a flurry of official and unofficial analyses of the establishment of the Service and its first year in operation. The observations and suggestions that have surfaced are numerous, but all are marked by the common denominator of recognising the extraordinary importance of the EEAS to the attempts to introduce more coherence, efficiency and visibility to the EU's external action. Many of the analyses, inevitably, cast a slightly wider net and consider the other linked changes introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, such as the appointment of the HR/VP; the President of the European Council; and the EU delegations. Indeed, the analysis should properly be extended to the President of the Commission since the Service is mandated to support all of the senior positions in EU external relations, as well as the Commission itself.

A joint letter from twelve foreign ministers to the HR/VP of 8 December 2011 offered a number of suggestions designed to 'further enhance the effectiveness of the EEAS and to help it develop its full potential'¹. The building up of the Service was acknowledged to be a 'complex process' that will require



time. The proposals included suggestions for ways to optimise the identification of 'political priorities' in the Foreign Affairs Council; measures to ensure that foreign policy issues are fully reflected in the discussions of the external relations (Relex) Commissioners; measures to improve internal procedures including more manuals, guidelines and common training; building up the delegations 'to their full potential' and, finally, full involvement of the Member States. All of these points are, to varying extents, reflected in the external analyses of the EEAS.

In the report by the High Representative to the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission of 22 December 2011, the HR/VP laid out a number of achievements of the young Service, notwithstanding the challenges of transition². There are undoubtedly positives and it is important to consider these as a balancer to the barrage of criticism of not only the Service but Ashton herself. It is, however, worth asking how many of the 'positives' (the response to the Arab Spring, the International Task Force for Libya, the heightened urgency of the Middle East Peace Process or the coordination of anti-piracy efforts in the Horn of Africa) are specifically due to the creation of the EEAS or the wider changes instigated by the Lisbon Treaty. Indeed, the rudiments of many of the responses to international events had been established prior to the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty.

The main gist of the HR/VP's remarks concerns the changes wrought by the Lisbon Treaty and these include the assumption of the responsibilities of the rotating Presidency in external relations; enhancing consistency in EU external relations; the role of the EU delegations; organisational issues including staff and recruitment; and budget and financial management issues. The HR/VP claims progress in each of these areas, but also notes substantial challenges remaining. The future priorities include 'a consolidation of the capacity to deliver policy substance', an emphasis on the work of the EU delegations; progress in building a 'shared organisational culture for the EEAS' and a resolution to the remaining outstanding issues in the relationship with the Commission.

The External Fascination Service

Most of these points are picked up in the external analyses, but a number of additional points of interest also arise. For instance, Stefan Lehne, makes a number of practical suggestions to enhance the institutional capacity of the EEAS, such as introducing two-level deputies to the High Representative, addressing the 'semi-detached' status of the crisis management bodies, greater delegation of responsibility, greater use of planning and option papers prepared by the Service and streamlining of the political dialogue mechanism. He notes, presciently, that any such institutional enhancements depend heavily upon Member States' 'buy in', constructive engagement on the part of the Commission, and stronger and more visible leadership on behalf of the High Representative³.



A report by Chatham House makes a number of compelling suggestions for the development of the EEAS but, like Lehne, the authors note that, 'The single biggest challenge for the next phase of the EEAS's development is to set a clear and compelling direction for the medium and long term, and ensure that the main stakeholders are prepared to back it up politically, diplomatically and with the necessary resources'⁴.

The analyses continued, in the same vein, into this year. A report from the European Policy Centre took a slightly different approach by looking at specific policy areas or aspects of them. Their conclusions nevertheless reflected those of other studies in terms of the need for a strategy for the delegations so that they might emerge as 'fully-fledged political actors' with appropriate and enhanced staffing; better coordination at all levels of the Service; space for 'creative

The issue then is not so much strategy as a clearer connection and, in particular, priorities between the various geographical, thematic and continental strategies.

policy entrepreneurship' and, finally, longer-term strategic thinking on foreign policy which is 'not yet sufficiently reflected in the organisational structure of the EEAS'⁵. Steven Blockmans notes that the structural weaknesses that perhaps hinder the development of a single voice need addressing, but this is insufficient without more concentration on 'passing a single message, in partnership with Member States and based on a substantial agenda'⁶.

In addition to the 'inside' and outside reviews, David Spence's contribution deserves special mention since it offers a 'practitioner's view' from a recently retired EEAS, and former Commission official. His particular vantage point enables him to pin-point 'an issue that dare not speak its name' – the existence of varying mind-sets⁷.

Unsurprisingly, given the newness of the EEAS, there are plenty of suggestions for how to improve the EEAS with the 2013 review in mind. Some of the suggestions are, however, clearly longer term in nature. This prompts the question of where the priorities should lie with the review in mind and what will need to be addressed in the longer term. Although many of the reports mentioned above cover most of the pertinent issues, they were generally not structured around shorter- and longer-term priorities.

Short-term wins

In this context short-term means from now until 2013 (the HR/VP report will be presented in September) which means that most of the changes suggested in the reports referred to above will be of a longer-term nature.

There are a number of suggestions though which could yield shorter-term wins and thus boost the morale of those in the Service and its external standing. The first is to capitalise on the presence of most of the EEAS in one location. EEAS officials were spread across eight locations for the first year

of the Service's existence, which posed obvious coordination challenges and was detrimental to the construction of an *esprit de corps*. A common location will facilitate communication and will contribute to a possible socialisation effect.

The key problems facing the EEAS are twofold. The first concerns the general lack of strategic direction of the EU's external relations and, more narrowly, the lack of vision within the Service. The issue, as often stated, is not so much one of a lack of strategy per se, but a surfeit. Reflections on the first year of the EEAS contained in a Chatham House Report make this clear when the authors observe that, 'Beyond 134 individual country strategies, [the EU] has strategies for most regions (Central Asia, the Andes, etc.), thematic issues (counter-terrorism, non-proliferation, etc.), even whole continents (Asia, Africa, Antarctica)⁸.

The issue then is not so much strategy per se, but the need for a clearer connection between the various geographical, thematic and continental strategies, and importantly, more sense of priority that would lend real substance to widely used but largely meaningless terms such as 'strategic partnerships'. The very fact that Ashton claims that in the period 1 January-November 2011, 504 statements were issued, including 78

HR declarations, 279 HR statements, 102 Spokesperson's statements and 45 local EU statements, invites an incredulous response – so what?⁹ Does this give third parties an idea of where the EU's priorities are? More to the point, have the six reviews of a number of strategic partners (Brazil, China, India, Russia, South Africa and the United States) really helped clarify the EU's strategic interests? Has the clearer enunciation of the EU's values on the world stage, in Articles 3 and 21, of the Treaty on European Union significantly influenced EU external relations? Does the EEAS and, more generally the EU, have a clear idea of its 'actorness' (to use the political science jargon) on the international stage including the role and place of the more normative aspects? The answer in many cases is negative, not only because of a lack of vision within the EU, but also because of reluctance on the part of the Member States (some more than others) to embrace the EU as a strategic actor.

Naturally, any formulation of short- to long-term objectives should be 'linked to the mobilization of resources both at the national and the European levels'¹⁰. Although the EU's Member States may lack obvious overarching external strategies, they are not trying to define the nature and substance of their actorness since they lack the Union's *sui generis* international nature. The growth and development of the EEAS and the EU more generally will therefore depend upon what is the essence of the 'distinctive European approach to foreign and security policy'; a claim made prematurely in the 2008 review of the implementation of the European Security Strategy¹¹.

The response to the issues of strategy and vision will defy quick fixes, yet three shorter-term solutions might set things on the right track. The first suggestion is to embrace what Balfour *et al* call 'creative policy entrepreneurship' consisting of policy communities around clusters of issues¹². Two examples would be development and conflict prevention where the Commission has actively sought wide participation in policy debates, especially among the non-governmental organisations. Greater buy-in by the Member States could be sought through the involvement of think tanks, many of whom

enjoy the official or quasi-official blessing of the governments or foreign ministries in question.

Second, the strategic planning office within the EEAS needs to be bolstered and this might also provide a useful role for a reinvigorated EU Institute for Security Studies, relocated to Brussels. The role of the European Council should not be ignored, especially since a broader strategic debate seemed to be what Herman Van Rompuy had in mind in February 2010 in his speech to the College d'Europe. Unfortunately,

The effect of the current composition of the Service is that it has imported some significant legacy problems into the Service.

but understandably, this debate was curtailed by the financial crisis and the subsequent preoccupation with '*gouvernement économique*'¹³. Such a debate will be difficult, but it is fundamental.

28 Third, the starting point would be a (more) serious twofold review. The first should be the instigation of a comprehensive review of the EU's relations with the United States, which remains the EU's only real strategic partner. The second is to build upon last year's review of the European Neighbourhood Policy which was replete with sensible sounding notions, like 'deep democracy', 'inclusive economic development' and conditionality¹⁴. But, these urgently need substance since the way in which the EU handles the aftermath of the Arab spring in its self-proclaimed neighbourhood will be a litmus test for many external partners, as will the seriousness of its commitments to the rule of law, effective multilateralism and human rights.

The second group of shorter-term objectives arises from the different organisational cultures represented in the original configuration of the Service. The predominant 'Relex' culture tends to be hierarchical and technocratic. The former Council Secretariat officials are used to smaller, lighter structures and have more experience in working closely with the Member States. The Member States defy a common diplomatic culture, other than the fact that they are all national diplomats on temporary assignment (or seconded military or civilian crisis management personnel) and, as such, will probably place national loyalty to the fore. To David Spence, the success of the EEAS will depend upon the extent to which EEAS officials 'take on the mind-set of an integrated diplomatic service'¹⁵. Although changing organisational culture, or mindsets, will be an ongoing process, there are some shorter-term tools that have been put in place to begin addressing this important issue. Training is by no means the only one, but it has been frequently mentioned as being of particular importance in this context. For instance, Spence notes that 'Intense training, accompanied by retreats and other devices can reverse signs of regression into competing mind-sets'¹⁶. It is worth noting that training is also mentioned in the letter of twelve foreign ministers to the HR/VP, as well as in her response. Drawing upon the EEAS's training strategy of 2011 the exploitation

of the socialisation effect is only possible with concentrated training, especially at induction. Beyond this, there needs to be acknowledgement that aside from some common courses, training has to be tailored to the specific demands of the individual. This point was made eloquently by Lehne when he correctly argued that, 'Joining the EEAS requires significant adjustment. Some Commission officials used to implementing technical programs find it difficult to get used to diplomatic work and the more political approach of the EEAS, just as some diplomats experience difficulties coping with the technical and financial aspects of the work of EU delegations'¹⁷.

Longer-term challenges

Most of the issues and problems identified in the documents quoted above will not be addressed by September 2013 and the first major review of the EEAS. Nevertheless, evidence that reform has started will be a positive attribute. Some issues are more intractable. One of the most obvious is the composition of the Service itself drawn from the Commission, the Council Secretariat and the Member States. The effect of the current composition of the Service is that it has imported some significant legacy problems into the Service.

The first is that the recruitment process has done little to change the geographical bias against the newer (post 2004) Member States nor, incidentally, has it addressed the lack of women at senior levels in the EEAS. Although the former may be explained away by the lack of diplomatic experience of many of these countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the latter is harder to explain. It is therefore important that the EEAS should resemble the EU members if a sense of ownership is to evolve. At the senior level this can be shaped by the Consultative Committee on Appointments and by the High Representative herself. The overwhelming concentration at the senior level, especially heads of delegation (all EU members are now represented) has diverted attention from the mid-level positions which, as Hemra *et al* observe, is a

The slew of academic, media and official comment on the EEAS could be seen as demoralising for those in the EEAS. Conversely, it could be seen as recognition of the extraordinary importance of the support role assigned to the EEAS.

'critical layer in terms of defining the organizational culture'¹⁸. A secondary challenge in this area is the need to create a level playing field. Although appointments are made first and foremost on the grounds of merit, there are significant differences between equivalent experience and rank for some national diplomats and those who entered the Service from the Commission. This is a particularly vexatious issue since, on the one hand, strict equivalence that involves demotion in terms of rank for some national diplomats would clearly be demotivating. On the other hand, relevant prior diplomatic

experience and language abilities (especially traditionally 'hard languages') should be recognised. Hence, it may be necessary to further develop the notion of 'merit', including an understanding of equivalence and a recognition of special qualities where they exist, which may be of particular relevance to the delegations.

The third issue of considerable importance, highlighted in all of the reports mentioned above, is the future of delegations. Most of the 140 delegations remain modestly staffed at the AD level (albeit with some notable exceptions), yet they are expected, now that they are Union delegations, to assume a greater range of responsibilities including those more oriented towards traditional foreign and security policy preoccupations. Given the economic environment in which the EEAS must operate, with a view to budget neutrality by the end of next year, there is little chance of substantially improved resources. Although this is a serious constraint on innovation, a more strategic approach to the EU's external role which establishes priorities, of the type advocated above, would help direct needs and resources. Similarly, more pooling and sharing of reporting and analysis at the national and European levels, as suggested by Lehne, would be of benefit not only to the delegations, but also to financially stressed national diplomatic services¹⁹. The continuing and expanded involvement of senior national diplomats in delegations is of critical importance, in part because it is more likely to encourage pooling and sharing, but also because it makes charges (such as those from the United Kingdom) of 'competence creep' less likely if, by so doing, they will indirectly damage national diplomats assigned to the Service.



Finally, the conflict prevention, peace-building and crisis management aspects of the EEAS remain inadequately joined up. Indeed the former aspects were co-developed (sometimes competitively) under the CFSP and Commission guises. The term 'peace-building' was a Commission term seldom heard in the Council Secretariat and crisis management has remained hobbled by Member State political concerns and resource shortages. The choice of when and how to intervene needs to be more closely steered by clear strategic priorities (as argued above) and few crises that are likely to confront the EU are uni-dimensional. There is a compelling need to give substance to the comprehensive approach to security that the EU espouses.

Conclusions

The slew of academic, media and official comment on the EEAS could be seen as demoralising for those in the EEAS. Conversely, it could be seen as recognition of the extraordinary importance of the support role assigned to the EEAS. These comments, as well as the articles cited, are offered in this spirit.

There are no easy fixes and in all likelihood the Service will take years to mature and to define its space and role. Yet, as with any person, the early years are critical in influencing the paths of development in later years. Of the challenges likely to be faced, the most urgent is to address the organisational culture and mindsets of not only those in the Service and the EU institutions but, just as importantly, the Member States – especially the big three. A change of mindset will do wonders to aid the development of the EEAS, without it the Service's development risks being stifled and the aspirations for the change introduced by the Lisbon Treaty – greater coherence, effectiveness and visibility in the EU's external relations – will be lost. As in Milne's poem, quoted at the outset, it may well take the EEAS six years to reach its full potential and, hopefully, to be 'as clever as clever'.

Notes

- ¹ Joint letter from the Foreign Ministers of Belgium, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden, to the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the Commission, Catherine Ashton, 8 December 2011.
- ² Report by the High Representative to the European Parliament, Council and the Commission, 22 December 2011.
- ³ Lehne, S., More Action, Better Service: How to strengthen the European External Action Service, *Policy Outlook*, 16 December 2011 (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace).
- ⁴ Hemra, S., T. Raines and R. Whitman, A Diplomatic Entrepreneur: Making the most of the European External Action Service, *Chatham House Report*, December 2011.
- ⁵ Balfour, R., A. Bailes and M. Kenna, The European External Action Service at work: How to improve EU foreign policy, (Brussels: European Policy Centre), pp. 47-49.
- ⁶ Blockmans, S., The European External Action Service on year on: First signs of strengths and weaknesses, (Den Haag: CLEER Working Papers, 2012/2), p. 38.
- ⁷ Spence, D., The Early Days of the European External Action Service: A Practitioner's View, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, vol. 7, 2012, p. 133.
- ⁸ Hemra, S., *et al.*, p. 9.
- ⁹ Report by the High Representative, Para. 11.
- ¹⁰ Duke, S., K. Pomorska and S. Vanhoonacker, The EU's Diplomatic Architecture: The Mid-term challenge, *DSEU Policy Paper No 10*, February 2012.
- ¹¹ Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy: Providing Security in a Changing World, Brussels, S407/08, 11 December 2008.
- ¹² Balfour *et al. supra* Note 5, p. 48.
- ¹³ Address by Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council to the College d'Europe, Bruges, 25 February 2010, PCE 34/10.
- ¹⁴ A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood: A review of European Neighbourhood Policy, Joint Communication by the High Representative of The Union For Foreign Affairs And Security Policy and the European Commission, Brussels, COM(2011) 303, 25 May 2011.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 133.
- ¹⁶ Spence, p. 133.
- ¹⁷ Lehne, *supra* Note 3, p. 16.
- ¹⁸ Hemra *et al. supra* Note 4, p. 18.
- ¹⁹ Lehne, *supra* Note 3, p. 5.