

The EU's External Action Service: new actor on the scene

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The European External Action Service (EEAS) was born on 1st January. Conceived nine years ago in the Convention on the Future of Europe, its setting up has been delayed by problems of ratification of the Lisbon Treaty and then by difficult negotiations on the new service. Its birth has been long and complicated, but EEAS is finally here. What are the prospects for this new arrival on the international scene?

The organisation

The main task of the EEAS is to assist the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, to fulfil her mandate. This includes chairing the EU's Foreign Affairs Council, the conduct of the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the coordination of the European Commission's responsibilities in the field of external relations. Thus she and her service bring together the management of the two 'pillars' of EU foreign policy - a crucial innovation.

On the Brussels scene EEAS is not a new 'institution' but a 'functionally autonomous body': separate from the Commission and the Council of Ministers. Its personnel (estimated initially at 3,720) come from the Commission and the Council Secretariat plus diplomats from the 27 EU member states who will represent at least one-third of the staff.

Its organisation chart at headquarters includes directorates-general covering countries and regions of the world; multilateral and thematic affairs; administration, budget, security and communication; a crisis management directorate, a civilian planning capability, and the Military Staff and Situation Centre that were previously located in the EU's Council Secretariat. It also has departments for planning, legal affairs, etc.

Outside headquarters EEAS includes more than 130 Union Delegations in non-member countries and international organisations. Since the Lisbon Treaty came into force these Delegations have had the task of representing not only the Commission but also, in place of the rotating Presidency, the EU's common foreign and security policy. For the first time the EU is represented by a single voice abroad: this innovation is potentially even more important than the new structure at headquarters.

The potential

EEAS provides the EU with a more coherent, visible and effective way of conducting foreign policy both at headquarters and outside the EU. Moreover, it creates a structure in which national diplomats and officials of EU institutions work side by side. This offers the chance for European policy-making to be enriched by national experience, and national policy-making by European experience. The fact that national diplomats will return to their service of origin after a period means that their EU experience will reinforce the European dimension of foreign policy at the national level.

In future, young Europeans making a career in foreign affairs will be able to work both in national diplomacy (in a foreign ministry or an embassy abroad) and in a European service (in Brussels or a Union Delegation in a non-EU country). The next generation of diplomats will enjoy a better understanding of the practical realities of European and national action, and have the chance to develop a truly European diplomatic culture.

While national Foreign Ministries will face continuing pressure from Finance Ministers for savings in public expenditure, EEAS can provide alternative means of providing common services for member states in consular affairs, reporting on political and economic developments, or other fields. If it performs well, and in harmony with national embassies, EEAS can make European diplomacy more effective and more economical.

The Problems

The structure of EEAS reflects the 'double-hatted' approach that was basic to its conception. It is also tasked to assist other actors in EU foreign policy - the President of the European Council and the President of the Commission. But there is a grave risk of friction and rivalry between EEAS and the services of the Commission, and this would be particularly damaging since much of the EU's action in international affairs is related to common policies such as environment, energy, trade and agriculture. Since the High Representative is also Vice-President of the Commission, the EEAS should operate in many ways like a service of the Commission, but this will require good sense and cooperation on both sides.

EEAS has begun life with handicaps. The long delay in its creation has led to uncertainty and low morale among personnel transferred to the new service. Although they are to 'carry out their duties and conduct themselves solely with the interests of the Union in mind', the nationalism displayed by member states in setting up the service has given an unfortunate impression.

The organisation chart includes 'strategic planning' and 'training', but adequate resources have not yet been allocated to these important functions. The High Representative is expected to take decisions by mid-2011 on training for EEAS personnel. As for strategic planning, one of the successes of Javier Solana's team was the development of the European Security Strategy as an over-arching concept, and one of the weaknesses of the Commission in external relations was its lack of an overall planning capacity.

Another outstanding question is the EU's representation in international organisations: although efforts last year to solve this problem at the UN failed, EEAS should in future play a more important role. But a single voice in international forums is not enough, and sometimes it is not even necessary: the EU needs to have a single message.

The verdict

Three years ago EPC made ten recommendations for EEAS in its report *The EU Foreign Service: How to build a more effective common policy* (Working Paper 28, November 2007). So far, only half of these have been realised. But it would be unfair to make premature judgements after only one month. Much remains to be done to bring EEAS up to cruising speed, and the High Representative is to make a review by mid-2013 of its organisation and functioning, accompanied if necessary by proposals for change.

With good sense and good management, the outstanding problems can be overcome. EEAS should provide a new impetus by bringing the EU's resources together in a streamlined system for developing, deciding and executing European foreign policy. It should create new ideas and new synergies and enable the EU to act more decisively in international affairs.

With the structure of EEAS now largely decided, it is time to look at the substance rather than the process, and in the coming months EPC plans to analyse the question of what changes EEAS can really make to Europe's external impact.

EPC has long supported the creation of the new service: now that it exists, we wish it energy, courage, and luck!

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