

The European External Action Service

By Charles Grant

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The European External Action Service (EEAS) is, potentially, a very useful tool for enhancing British influence in the EU and in the world. The potential downsides for the UK are relatively limited: Britain has to pay a share of its administrative budget; some good FCO officials are seconded to the service, and thus lost to the UK for a while; and there is a risk that the EEAS will be so badly managed that it will do or say things that embarrass the EU, or indeed the UK. The downsides are limited because EU foreign policy is decided by unanimity. The Union and its EEAS cannot announce a policy or pursue an action that the UK disagrees with. The UK can block whatever it wants to block.

The potential upsides of the EEAS are considerable. It brings together the external relations parts of the Commission, and the departments of the Council of Ministers dealing with foreign policy, which used to be separate organisations and often pursued different policies. The EEAS adds in a sprinkling of seconded national diplomats, to boost its expertise.

The EEAS should enable the EU to run truly joined-up foreign policies. The EU's various instruments – military and policing operations, aid policies, trade policies, visa policies, energy policies and foreign policies – have often been unco-ordinated and at cross purposes, for example in Bosnia, for much of the last decade. In theory, the post of High Representative/Vice President (HR/VP) – based in both the EEAS and the Commission – should enable the various external policies to be co-ordinated.

The existence of the EEAS – which, through the secondees, has close links to national foreign ministries – should encourage common analyses of problems. The EEAS delegations bring together people from national embassies in, say, Beijing, to share information and draft common papers on what is happening. These reports feed into the EEAS in Brussels, where there is more expertise than in the old days of a separate Commission and Council Secretariat. The best analysis goes up to meetings of senior national officials and foreign ministers; in the long run, common analyses should encourage common policy.

This system has particular potential benefits for the UK. As one of the 'big three', with a global foreign policy

and great expertise on many parts of the world, the UK is naturally an influential player in the EEAS. Most small countries do not have policies or strong views on most parts of the world. The British – like the French and the Germans – can use the EEAS to mould the views of smaller member-states and educate them in the realities of foreign policy. Many EEAS officials and smaller member-states look to the big three to give a lead on EU foreign policy. They know that – as the CER has always argued – the EEAS can only work well if the big three engage in it, rather than seeing it as a rival. Most small countries reckon that the EEAS can save them money: if they rely on it to represent their interests in many corners of the world, they can make savings in their own diplomatic services. The British would not want to do that, but should see the EEAS as a useful supplement to their own policy-making – and as a vehicle for promoting British interests.

The EEAS has already had some successes. Catherine Ashton and her officials have been mediating between Serbia and Kosovo and have achieved useful results. In Burma, the EEAS – working closely with the British – has helped to persuade the regime to embrace reform (the EU was able to lift sanctions much sooner than the Americans). Another success story is Somalia, where an able EU Special Representative – Alex Rondos – has co-ordinated the EU naval operation against pirates, the training of African Union peacekeepers by the EU, the efforts to build up local naval forces in the region, and the rule of law mission that has improved the courts in several neighbouring countries.

Lady Ashton, backed by the big three, has led the efforts to persuade the Iranian government to abandon its nuclear programme. This has not produced a successful outcome, yet, but the process has been a success. The Europeans have backed Lady Ashton and the big three, while the Americans, Chinese and Russians have also gone along with this diplomatic process. The Americans have been impressed by the severity of the economic sanctions that EU member-states have enforced against Iran.

Overall, however, the EEAS has failed to meet expectations. Setting up a new organisation was never going to be easy. But there are some very real problems.

The European Commission often stifles the EEAS. Many of its commissioners and directorates-general do not want to be co-ordinated by the EEAS. Some of them take a more constructive approach, but often there is no joined up foreign policy. Lady Ashton has never been given the scope to co-ordinate the commissioners who work on foreign policy (one result is that the Commission's trade policy is sometimes less effective than it should be: its trade officials may lack awareness of the foreign policy context in which they operate). The Commission controls the purse strings of the major programmes that the EEAS operates, sometimes using this control to dominate the EEAS, and is extremely inflexible on how the money is spent. The staff in overseas delegations who come from the Commission report to the Commission in Brussels rather than to their heads of mission. And the Commission in Brussels manages their staff assessments too. Many senior Commission officials resent the creation of the EEAS, which – as they see it – has eroded Commission prerogatives. In unguarded moments, some Commission officials admit that they do not want the EEAS to succeed.

But the EEAS cannot blame all its ills on the Commission. There is, as yet, no single corporate culture. Most of its staff hail from the Commission, and in some parts of the EEAS they are not integrated well with those from the Council and the other member-states. In some areas the EEAS has not yet built up high-quality policy expertise (the US State Department complains about the Asia units, for example). Many staff complain about poor management in the EEAS. Decisions are often taken very

slowly. Reporting lines are not always clear. Some staff feel demotivated. The High Representative has too much on her plate; one major problem is that the EU treaties failed to give her any deputies.

The big three are not sufficiently engaged in the EEAS. The British are perceived as somewhat semi-detached, partly because of the battles they fought in recent years over 'competence creep' and who has the right to speak on the EU's behalf. Whatever the rights and wrongs of those arguments, the British appeared to many others to be theological, and the dispute created enormous ill-will towards the UK. The French are also, some of the time, rather detached from the EEAS, seeing it as a British-dominated body. They are sometimes concerned that the EEAS could try to limit France's freedom of action, and sceptical that it could add much value. The Germans are perceived as taking a more positive approach, though on certain issues, like China, they sometimes try to avoid dealing with the EEAS.

In summer 2013 the EEAS is carrying out a review of how it works. This offers the UK a major opportunity to propose reforms to the institution. If it did so, it would show that the UK can be constructive as well as critical on EU institutions. A more effective EEAS would be in the British national interest. The UK would find that if it proposed reforms, many others would follow its lead. Many good ideas are outlined in a non-paper on strengthening the EEAS drafted by 14 ministries of Foreign Affairs, including Germany, Italy and Spain.

The priorities should be: giving the HR/VP a real role in co-ordinating those parts of the Commission that work on external relations; giving the EEAS more say over the spending of money; giving the HR/VP several deputies, one of whom would be responsible for administration; and making a greater effort to improve the expertise of the EEAS, for example by increasing the share of staff from the member-states, and by revising the staff regulation so that under-performing officials can be fired.

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Additional information

Some ideas on how to improve the EEAS are contained in a CER policy brief of July 2012 by Edward Burke, 'Europe's External Action Service: Ten steps towards a credible EU foreign policy', http://www.cer.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2012/pb_eeas_4july12-5377.pdf.

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