

EUROPEAN DIPLOMATIC SERVICE:

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Putting Europe First

Brussels has often been a byword for bureaucracy, now, keen to burnish its image abroad, it is soon to be known as a force for diplomacy. So should Europe's national diplomatic services be on their guard, or can they gain from the new arrangements?



tHE DRAMA OVER THE appointment of two top officials to represent the European Union has distracted attention from the fact that Europe is about to give birth to a new diplomatic service.

The real vanguard of a stronger EU in international affairs will be the new European External Action Service, created by the Lisbon Treaty. Indeed, this Service not only has the potential largely to determine the EU foreign policy agenda and shape the Union's external appearance, but it will also increasingly pose a threat to member states' national diplomacy.

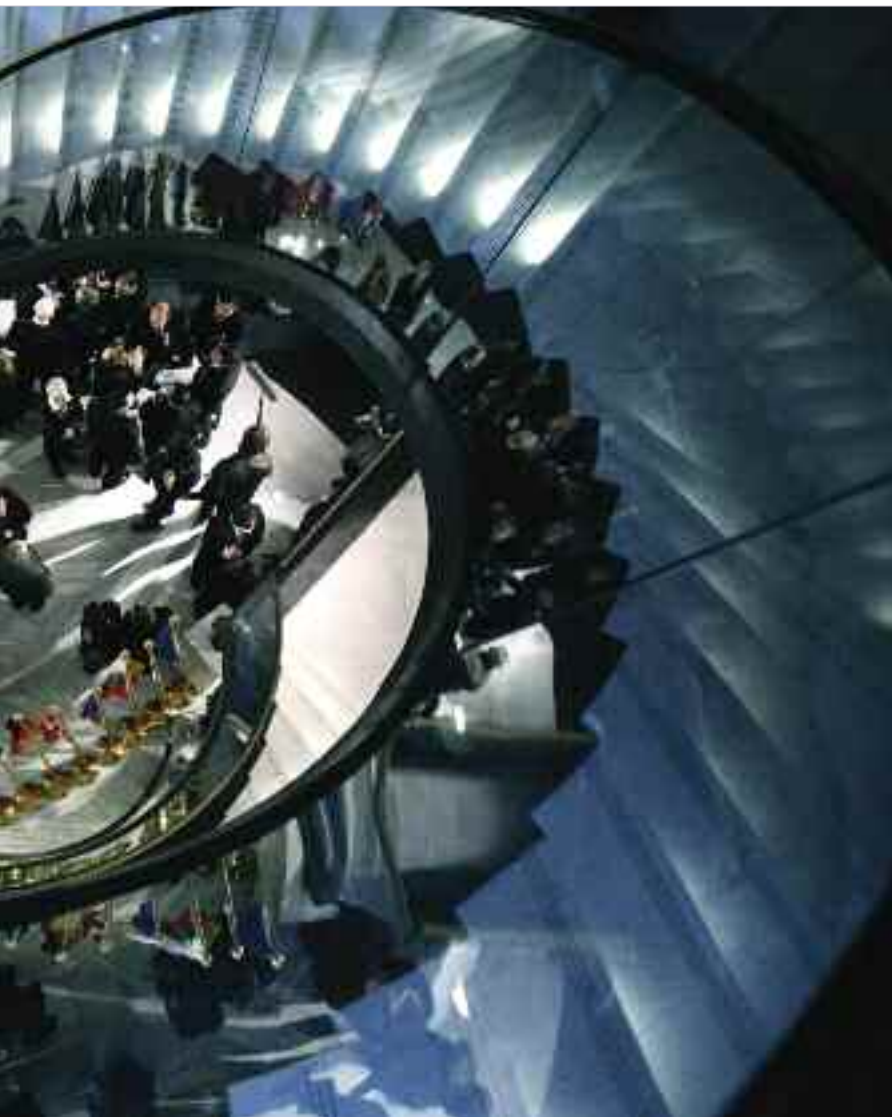
When Baroness Catherine Ashton, the new High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy – in effect EU foreign minister – presents her final proposal on the organisation and functioning of the Action Service in April, she is expected largely to follow recommendations of an EU working group. It advocated creating the

service as an independent organisation with its own headquarters, budget and staff, seconded from the European Commission, the Council Secretariat and member states' diplomatic services.

The Service's primary function will be to support the foreign minister. However, EU diplomatic staff will also assist the European Council President, European Commissioners and even members of the European Parliament when carrying out EU foreign policy duties.

Geographic and thematic desks will be set up at the Service headquarters, resembling the structure of most national foreign ministries. These desks will take over EU foreign policy planning and implementation from those who have been primarily concerned with this task: the Commission, the Council Secretariat and member states' permanent representations to the EU. The only exceptions – but crucial ones – are enlargement, trade and development policy, which will remain the Commission's responsibility.

Externally, the Action Service will be able to



rely on its own dense network of embassies and Delegations. Over the last four decades, largely unnoticed by the general public, more than one hundred and thirty Commission Delegations have been set up to represent the Commission abroad and in international organisations. These Delegations will now be transformed into EU Delegations and put under the authority of the EU foreign minister and her diplomatic staff.

HEAVYWEIGHT

The creation of the EU diplomatic corps is part of members' long-standing efforts to overcome two major shortcomings of the Union's foreign policy. The Action Service is expected to strengthen significantly the consistency of EU foreign policy, which has suffered from the division of labour between the EU institutions and member states. EU ambassadors should also give the Union a single voice and face abroad.

To strengthen foreign policy consistency, the Action Service's desk officers in Brussels are expected to take the lead in formulating an overarching strategy and follow-up on implementing key policy activities, such as engagement with the EU's neighbours, or civilian and military crisis management.

In the spheres of enlargement, trade and development policy, EU diplomatic staff will liaise closely with their Commission counterparts and shape these portfolios to a considerable extent by proxy. The Service's desks may therefore be regarded as the main EU foreign policy agenda-setters of the future.

Representing the world's greatest economic power and the biggest development aid provider, EU Delegations will almost inevitably become diplomatic heavyweights. Bundling the roles currently fulfilled by the Commission Delegations and the six-monthly rotating EU Presidency, the new Action Service will be in charge of liaising with host governments and act as chief negotiator for the Union on virtually all foreign policy matters.

The Delegations will oversee the implementation of the ever-growing number of EU agreements with other states, including those on enlargement, trade and development policy. They will also coordinate members' diplomacy in the field.

In international organisations, Delegations will assume a highly visible role by speaking on behalf of the entire EU, conducting the major thrust of multilateral negotiations with other states and briefing, as well as coordinating, members' diplomatic activities.

APPEALING CHALLENGE

The new EU diplomatic service will enjoy unparalleled powers in deciding the EU's foreign policy agenda and also largely define the Union's external appearance. Secondment to the Service will be an appealing professional challenge and an attractive career opportunity for many member state diplomats.

Assuming that these seconded national diplomats can be swiftly integrated into the Service, which will partly depend on the quality of the planned common EU diplomatic training, they will become transmitters of new experiences, expertise and empathy for the foreign policy interests of other parts of the Union when rotating back to their national diplomatic services.

In this manner, the Action Service could evolve as the nucleus of a genuine European

diplomatic spirit, which will put national diplomatic traditions under increasing pressure. However, distinct national foreign policy interests and bureaucratic cultures are deeply ingrained and will not vanish overnight.

COST SAVING

When the first EU Delegations start work, the need for national diplomatic missions in some capitals, and even some international organisations will be subject to greater scrutiny. Aiming to reduce foreign policy budgets, smaller EU member states in particular might be tempted to ask EU Delegations to represent their interests.

However, the closure of EU member's embassies will be an exception for the time being. At least during the initial setup phase, the Delegations will not have the staff necessary for all their duties, even less so for the diplomatic representation of individual EU member states.

Most EU governments are likely to find the ability to pursue distinct political, commercial and cultural interests more important than cutting foreign policy costs. In any case, the Service will have to perform first before member states begin seriously to consider entrusting Delegations to represent their interests.

Once fully staffed, EU diplomats will render member state representatives to international organisations increasingly obsolete. In some, like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), common EU

positions have already largely superseded national diplomacy. The arrival of the EU Delegations will sooner rather than later question national delegations' continued right to exist.

In other important international bodies, however, the EU Delegations will not be able to contest the central role of EU member state diplomats as easily. The UN General Assembly, for example, will not allow a prominent EU role until the legal standing of the new EU Delegation has been acknowledged by a formal General Assembly resolution.

In NATO, the mere existence of an EU Delegation is inconceivable for the foreseeable future, given strong opposition in the alliance towards the formation of an EU caucus.

Is EU member states' national diplomacy under threat? EU Delegations will doubtlessly become potent rivals to members' diplomatic representations in other states and international organisations. However, their work is unlikely to supersede national diplomacy in the immediate future.

For good or bad, resource constraints, questions of legal standing in international organisations and, most importantly, the persistence of distinct EU member state foreign policy interests will keep the Action Service's full potential in check for some time. Nevertheless, once fully in place and demonstrating its ability to deliver, the Service will increasingly render EU members' national diplomacy obsolete.



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