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Statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton on EEAS Review

"This debate is an opportunity to take stock of the progress we have made turning a few words in the Lisbon Treaty into a global foreign policy service of 3400 staff and 141 Delegations with recognition around the world, based on the bringing together of existing services in a more coherent way. No longer does the EU operate in silos across the globe – today, as a result of what we have achieved, we are much more joined up and much better able to project the EU's policies and values internationally.

In fact the Service itself only came into existence on 1 January 2011 and was launched against the backdrop of the worst economic crisis Europe has faced and the unprecedented events of the Arab Spring.

Making the best use of scarce financial resources has been a guiding principle in the establishment of the service, while at the same time meeting the dual expectations that we will be present in places that we have not been before such as Libya and Myanmar Burma and also that we will remain on the ground in difficult circumstances – in Iraq, Afghanistan and Mali.

The pace of work and of new challenges since has forced us to adapt and adjust the structures we initially created. While the EEAS has not always been as fast or as comprehensive as I would have liked, the EEAS Review now gives us an opportunity to step back and to look at what other changes and Improvements we should or could make to leave an even more capable service as a key legacy of my term as the first HRVP.

I would like to congratulate the rapporteurs Elmar Brok and Roberto Gualtieri for their thoughtful and balanced report. Along with Guy Verhofstadt you were two of the co-architects of the Madrid political agreement on the EEAS Decision back in 2010. Your commitment and support to the establishment of the Service was vital, so I'm pleased to say I agree with very much of what you have written in the report.
Our aim was to create a 21st Century European service to tackle the new challenges we are increasingly faced with. To add value to the work of Member states to do more than a foreign ministry – combining elements of development and of defence.

Our strength lies in our ability to respond to a crisis in a wide ranging way, short and long term, humanitarian and development, security and political, as well as deploying military and civilian missions to achieve lasting security and prosperity.

Two and a half years after the establishment of the EEAS, we can say that we have a modern and operational service that attracts the best fonctionnaires and diplomats from all around Europe. It is there to deliver EU foreign policy. Nobody defined this ahead of Lisbon coming into force.

Now that we have seen the changes and they bedded down, it has become easier to define exactly what we mean by this. For me it is about three main elements:

- our neighbourhood, where we have unparalleled influence and leverage to promote and to deliver change and we should use it;

- the comprehensive approach – the merger of the three jobs in the Lisbon treaty makes the EU a unique foreign policy partner that can combine diplomacy with development aid, rule of law support, military and civilian operations to tackle not only the symptoms but also the underlying causes of a crisis or situation and ensures our capacity to remain there for the long term;

- and critical mass – we are the world’s largest economy – in today’s world, it matters: collectively we can achieve things that Member State individually cannot do - that is why for example the EU leads on Somalia, Serbia Kosovo and on the Iran nuclear file. So, in approaching the Review, we should be looking at ways to strengthen the Service's ability to deliver in these core areas.

I am pleased that to see that we agree on so many issues: in particular your high level of ambition. I welcome your support for the comprehensive approach concept, the need for faster and more effective CFSP and CSDP procedures, and the central importance of my role as Commission Vice President in ensuring the overall coherence of EU external relations.

Similarly, I am encouraged by the positive input to the review from Member States, which go in the same direction. The success of the EEAS rests on its unique capacity to bring together all the EU institutions and contributions to maximise influence and at the same time to reduce costs to our citizens and Member States.

You will see much in the review that I will present in the next few weeks in common with this Report. It is my intention not only to highlight what works, but also to think about what could be improved either in the short term or for the future.

I want to look for quick wins but I also want to point to medium term changes that will require some adjustment, ready for the next change of mandate.

These recommendations will be designed to improve further the effectiveness of our Service which is widely judged already to have delivered a step change in EU foreign policy. But we should not delude ourselves – Lisbon left CFSP as intergovernmental and subject to unanimity decision making: in situations where there is an absence of political will or an agreement amongst the Member States there are limits to what the Service can deliver.
One of the key tasks is not only to act as the EU’s institutional memory on foreign policy and the home of its global network but also to provide a clear and authoritative lead in building consensus between Member States on strategies and priorities, working closely with the Commission and European Parliament.

In that respect, the service supports me in my role both as High Representative and as Vice President of the Commission. This enables it to play an important coordination role on EU external policies. Partnership with the European Parliament is very important to the success of the EEAS. The agreement that we have on political accountability has brought considerable improvements, from the very successful practice of exchanges of view with newly-appointed heads of delegation and EUSRs; excellent co-operation on election observation missions, and the intensified dialogue at all levels, including in sensitive areas requiring the sharing of classified information.

I have encouraged the senior management to be as open to you as possible and I am glad they regularly participate in your meetings and events - more than 100 events in 2012 alone. I also want to pay particular tribute to the efforts by our Heads of Delegation and their staff in supporting the official visits of Members of this Parliament.

I am very open to looking with you at ways to continue to improve our co-operation.

Looking at the content of the Report, I want to focus on three main areas: co-operation with the Commission; the question of deputies and the structure and operation of the Service.

A number of questions have been raised about co-operation between the EEAS and the Commission.

My own view is that there is a tendency to underestimate the good progress that we have made in finding workable solutions to the changes needed following the decision to set up the EEAS as a self-standing body. However, in line with your recommendations, this is an area that we are discussing with the Commission, including the question of making more frequent and more effective use of the Group of External Relations Commissioners under my chairmanship.

I should add however that there is already extensive joint working between me and my commission colleagues and their services.

Commissioner Cioloș on agriculture, where we are working together on Mongolia and China and he will play a vital role in our work in Myanmar at the task force in November.

Cecilia Malmström, Neelie Kroes and I jointly put forward a cyber security strategy. Antonio Tajani is a good close collaborator in our task forces, bringing hundreds of businesses in support of countries in transition.

Michel Barnier and I are engaged in support of the European council discussion on the defence industry. Kristalina Georgieva is heavily engaged in our response to the crisis in Syria and elsewhere. And of course my day to day collaboration with Andris Piebalgs and Stefan Fuele.

I am glad your report emphasizes the role of the EEAS in defining the strategic orientation of external financing instruments to ensure coherence between our foreign policy and development policy objectives. On the second issue, I agree there is a need for greater clarity on the question of who deputises for the High Representative/Vice President, including in the Parliament.
In line with your report, this should include - in a more structured way - empowering Commissioners to represent the High Representative fully in parliamentary matters and internationally. Furthermore, we should go further in what already happens, mandating specific missions to Foreign Ministers of Member States, in order to boost the collective impact of the Union's positions.

Finally I turn to the structure and operation of the service. We have come a long way and that has been recognised, but the EEAS is still work in progress.

I welcome the emphasis on getting the most out of our civilian and military missions. We deploy more than 7000 people in these missions in places like Pristina, Mogadishu, Tripoli, Bamako, Kabul, and Baghdad.

I therefore strongly support your proposals for improving the speed and effectiveness of operational decision-making in the area of CSFP and CSDP, and the integration of the responsible services in the structure. We have already been discussing simplification of procedures with Member States. This will be a very important area as we prepare for the European Council in December.

I also agree that we need to look at the internal structure and to clarify reporting lines, particularly given the budgetary situation. Already in the 2014 budget I will propose a reduction in the number of senior posts at AD 16 and AD15 and I believe there should be scope to go further in this direction in the context of the institutional transition at the end of next year.

Staffing issues naturally draw attention, both in your report and in the contributions from Member States. The quality of our people is what will determine our success and I have been very lucky in the quality of my people, not least in the man sitting next to me here and the people behind me. I want to thank Pierre Vimont and the management team for all of the hard work that they have undertaken over the course of the last two years.

The annual staffing report that we will soon present to the Parliament will confirm the good progress that we have made on ensuring a meaningful presence of all Member States as well a clear improvement in the presence of women in key management positions in Delegations. 18% of EEAS staff are now from Member States which have joined since 2004 which is very close to the 20% share in the overall population of the EU.

This figure also reflects the very small presence of officials from these countries which transferred from the Commission and the Council. Gender balance is and will remain a top priority for me – when I took office there were only 10 women Heads of Delegation.

Today there are 24 – an increase of well over 100%. And I have announced a further 4 appointments of women already in the 2013 package of Heads of Delegation.

Helga Schmid is our Political Director and Deputy Secretary General and works very actively in promoting networks and support for women within the service.

We are also now very close to the 1/3 target for the recruitment of national diplomats. Against this background, your report rightly highlights the importance of ensuring a strong presence of permanent officials. I agree that we need a human resources strategy that offers attractive and rewarding career prospects for all EEAS staff, including the officials who joined the service from the Commission and the Council.
In this context, I am pleased that from next month we will be opening publications of EEAS posts also to officials from the European Parliament and other institutions, in line with the provisions of the EEAS decision, as well as diplomats from Croatia.

As with any organisation, our level of ambition is constrained by the available resources. The EEAS review will therefore need to take account of our budgetary situation.

I am grateful to the support the European Parliament has given us.

As you know, the bulk of staff and other resources of EEAS were inherited from the Commission and the Council and the EEAS largely relies on the Commission for its corporate support. We have eliminated duplication and achieved streamlining in Brussels to provide resources for the new tasks.

As I said earlier, the EEAS is increasingly expected to be present and to remain in places that are high risk as well as to respond to changes that are going on – for example, we have new delegations in Libya and Myanmar.

In many cases, this comes with heavy and unavoidable security costs which amount to € 30m per year for Kabul, Libya, Baghdad, and other high-risk countries.

I am convinced that we need to look and transform the terms of the budget debate with Member States to take account of the potential savings for national diplomatic services as we make progress with things like shared reporting, co-location in "Europe Houses" and similar arrangements and working together more generally in the field on the ground.

Resources are also the key to any discussion on potential new areas of activity, including consular activities or more military experts in delegations – areas where the EEAS at present has limited expertise or competence. These changes will not happen overnight.

In conclusion, I welcome your report and you will see much in common with my Review proposals. We have gone from not having a service to a fully functioning service. I am truly grateful for the extremely supportive role of the European Parliament in the creation of the EEAS and I hope you will continue to make a necessary and positive contribution to this collective challenge. Through to the end of my mandate and well beyond."