The European Union's External Relations after Lisbon

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I am delighted and honoured to be invited to speak to you this afternoon on a rather broad theme: the European Union’s external relations after Lisbon. I should apologise first of all that I am addressing you in English – if you heard my German though you would understand why. I should also confess that I have only a very general knowledge of the topic; I dare say some of the participants this afternoon know a good deal more than I – so I apologise if sometimes I say things you already know.

Perhaps I should make a few quick remarks about my own background. I am one of the third of the members of the European External Action service who are employed on loan from the diplomatic services of the member states: in my case, the United Kingdom. I’ll come back to this feature later. My experience within the British Foreign Office fell very broadly into two parts: working on sometimes quite tricky and challenging bilateral relationships – Albania and Iraq in particular – and working on European Union issues (enlargement, and inter-institutional issues).

In this talk I’ll begin my recapitulating the changes which were effected by the Lisbon Treaty to the way in which the EU makes its external policy. Then I’ll try to give an assessment of how this has worked out in practice in the relatively short period of time that these new arrangements have been in place.

So, first of all, the institutional nuts and bolts.

The coordination of foreign and security policy has for decades been a particularly sensitive part of the wider integration project. This remains an area which the individual member states see as being central to their own sovereignty, and after Lisbon this continues to be reflected in the way in which decisions are taken.

But, set against this, for decades there has equally been a sense that, in a world after the Second World War where some actors are hugely more powerful than individual European countries, it made sense for the countries of Europe increasingly to coordinate their foreign policies; and, crucially, to give the European Union the ability to speak, and to speak effectively, with one voice. This has meant firstly the extension of the Treaties to provide for a Common Foreign and Security Policy, the establishment of new roles and positions to put this policy into effect, and the streamlining of the decision-making process.

I’ll spare you the ancient history of the development of CFSP structures through the various stages of Treaty change, and confine myself to the innovations brought about by the Lisbon treaty itself, which came into force on 1 December 2009. It’s probably easiest if I cover these by looking at two major developments: the creation of the post of High Representative for Foreign
Affairs and Security Policy, and the establishment of the European External Action Service, or EEAS for short.

The EU has for years now been struggling with the so-called Kissenger problem: Henry Kissenger never knew who to telephone when he wanted to 'speak to Europe'. Lisbon tries to make the answer to this through the creation of the post of High Representative. I say, tries, because there are still a number of senior EU figures – the President of the European Council, the President of the Commission, the President of the European Parliament, and the Head of Government and Foreign Minister of the member state holding the rotating Presidency – who continue to have a strong interest and role to play.

Nevertheless, Lisbon merged what previously were the two separate positions of High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy (before Lisbon, doublehatted with the job of Secretary-General of the Council of Ministers) with what was the position of Commissioner for External Relations. The underlying idea is that the new job equates to that of a Foreign Minister in a member state – although for obvious political and theological reasons it is not described as such. The double-hatted quality of the new job is expressed formally by the fact that the High Representative is also one of the six Vice-Presidents of the Commission. When the second Barroso Commission was appointed, this new position was filled by the British Commissioner, Baroness Catherine Ashton, known to her friends as Cathy.

The High Rep is appointed by the European Council acting by qualified majority. However in order to take up their role in the Commission, in particular as a Vice-President, the High Representative has to appear before the European Parliament for questioning and then be subject to the EP's vote of approval on the proposed College of Commissioners.

Cathy has a bewildering array of responsibilities, making her sound in some respects more like a multi-tiled prince of the ancien regime than a 21st century politician:

- she is the main coordinator and representative of the European Union's common foreign and security policy, speaking to and negotiating with third countries on behalf of the EU and its member states. But she does not 'make' policy: that remains the responsibility of the member states' Ministers of Foreign Affairs, meeting in the monthly sessions of the Foreign Affairs Council;

- however, another of Cathy's jobs is to chair the Foreign Affairs Council, and set its agenda. Previously this had been the responsibility of the Foreign Minister of the member state holding the rotating Presidency of the EU;

- as I say, Cathy is also one of the Vice-Presidents of the Commission, and – in theory at least – attends the weekly meetings of the College;
- Cathy is a participant in what are now at least quarterly meetings of the European Council;

- She must report regularly to the European Parliament in its sessions in Strasbourg and Brussels;

- She is the Head of the European External Actions Service, supervising this new Institution both in terms of its Headquarters in Brussels and its network of delegations across the planet;

- Cathy coordinates and supervises the work of the EU's various Special Representatives;

- She is Secretary-General of the Western European Union, President of the European Defence Agency and Chairperson of the board of the European Union Institute for Security Studies.

So, it's a pretty big job. I sometimes wonder whether it is too big for one person to handle – especially given the incredible and punishing travel obligations which it imposes. Small-minded observers, of whom there are unfortunately many when it comes to the European Union, have repeatedly criticised Cathy for not being present or visible – but the fact of the matter is that she is called upon daily to be in at least two places at once. We'll see later in these remarks that she, and the EU external policy as a whole, is making a real difference in the outside world – and that should be the ultimate litmus test for the success of the new arrangements.

Turning now to the second main new element flowing from Lisbon: the establishment of the European External Action Service. Again, before Lisbon, there were a number of separate, and sometimes competing, elements of the varying Institutions interested in external policy – in particular DG(E) in the Secretariat-General of the Council of Ministers, and DG RELEX in the Commission. So, Lisbon's idea was, again, to bring the two into a single framework, explicitly to support the single High Representative. As Charles Grant, Director of the Centre for European Reform, put it, without such a development it would '…be like having a conductor without an orchestra – or, rather, a conductor trying to conduct two separate orchestras at the same time.' So, if the Hi Rep is a bit like the EU's Foreign Minister, the EEAS is like the EU's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and diplomatic service.

But Lisbon also had the innovative idea of including, alongside the refugees from the Council Secretariat and the Commission, staff seconded from the national diplomatic services of the Member States – ie people like me. The agreement is that a third of the staff should come from this source.
Following Lisbon, there was a period of discussion of exactly how the EEAS would be constituted, and how it would be funded, which ended with the approval of the relevant Council decision on 20 July 2010. The EEAS was formally launched on 1 December 2010. Even then, though, Cathy had the grand total of some 30 staff working for her.

Since then, there's been a massive process of trying to set up in effect a Foreign Ministry from scratch. But the framework is now there – only sixteen months or so after launch. The new Service launched a massive recruitment process, receiving 8,830 applications for 181 jobs. In addition to the top officials, Secretary-General, Chief Operating Officer, Deputy Secretaries-General, there are now six managing directors, each responsible for a different geographical department, namely: Africa; Asia; the Americas; the Middle East and Southern Neighbourhood; non-EU European countries, including Switzerland; and Global and Multilateral Affairs. EEAS officials now chair nearly all of the various external working parties of the Council, a job hitherto done by officials from the member state holding the rotating Presidency. The old geographic desks in the Commission have been disbanded. There are also self-standing departments for horizontal issues, such as legal or administrative affairs. And it is now collocated in a single building a stone's throw from Rond Point Schuman, right at the heart of the European district in Brussels.

As I say, the staff are drawn from the Commission and Council and from the member states’ diplomatic services, seconded temporarily. Cathy appoints senior officials, including all Heads of Delegation, directly. There are no national quotas.

Abroad, the former Commission Delegations are now the responsibility of the EEAS, and are responsible for the whole range of EU business – in effect, if not in name, acting as EU embassies. There are EU Delegations in nearly every non-EU UN member state. With the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the Delegations have taken on the role previously carried out by the national embassies of the member state holding the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union. So, to give you a comparison, when I was British Ambassador in Albania, I chaired the regular meetings of EU Ambassadors for six months. Here in Switzerland I shall chair equivalent meetings for the entirety of my four year assignment. And I'm expected to represent the EU across the waterfront, not just on areas of what we used to call Community competence where the Commission took the lead.

Following these months of the big bang, as it were, the new Service now needs to consolidate. Budgetary constraints are obvious, and will make this process even more challenging. The organisation will need to be fine tuned, and changes made to respond to events in the real world. Processes and systems need to become embedded in relation to human resourcing, training,
IT and so on – the keystones of any effective large organisation. The ultimate aim is to be able to deliver effectively on agreed policy priorities.

The other major challenge which remains – despite this new single hierarchy – is the relationship between Cathy and the EEAS and the other EU Institutions, the Commission in particular. The Commission continues to be responsible for policy formation in areas which are vital components of the EU's external policy, most notably enlargement, trade policy and development assistance – but also other sectoral issues, like transport, energy, climate change and the environment, which are assuming increasing international importance. The Commission continue to provide a large number of officials working in Delegations abroad. So, an important chunk of work over the past few months has been working out how the liaison between the EEAS and the Commission should work, both on policy and on administrative issues.

The last – but probably most important – element of liaison is between the EEAS and the member states. As I said, the member states are adamant that they retain responsibility for making their own foreign policies, and will resist any attempt by the European Union at a power grab. So, it's very important that the EEAS respects the institutional balance achieved in the Lisbon treaty and is not perceived as trying to become the Foreign Ministry of the dreaded European 'Superstate'. That means that in the regular contacts and discussions, both in Brussels and in third countries, the Service must constantly be alive to member state concerns. It also means that senior officials from the EEAS have a regular dialogue with the Secretaries-General of the Foreign Ministries to establish the ground rules of cooperation, and to double check that things are running as they should be.

So much for the architecture: the nuts and bolts, as I said. But how do the new arrangements shape up in reality?

I've described how the new organisation has had to establish itself on the hoof, as it were. I've also mentioned the fact that it is doing so in a difficult financial and economic climate. The third massive challenge which has faced is in terms of its own area of policy responsibility. The decade leading up to the establishment of the EEAS was one of unparalleled turbulence and uncertainty, with the tragedy of 11 September 2001, and perhaps even more importantly the legacy of the financial crisis of 2008. The pre-eminence of America is no longer assured, but nor can we say that China or another rising power will take its place. The Euro crisis has also created a sense of fragility about Europe's place in the world.

In this increasingly competitive and uncertain world Europe risks losing influence – both as individual countries and as a group, unless we can act more coherently, both internally and externally. The new geo-political landscape is characterised by power shifts and global realignments, a process
which the recent economic and financial crisis has accelerated. We can either try to battle the storm on our own, or seek strength and solidarity by acting together. Nor can Europe now expect the US to solve all our problems for us: as events in the Arab world last year made clear. And I think there is also a more hard-edged, practical approach to policy making now. As I say, the old ‘superstate’, federalist ideal is no longer on the agenda. What is important is finding practical and above all cost-effective solutions to an increasing range of problems, in an increasingly unpredictable and uncertain environment.

Against this background, at the inception of the EEAS, Cathy established three key policy priorities: the EU's neighbourhood, its strategic partners; and security/crisis management. These priorities have stood the test of time. But the already turbulent backdrop to the work of the EEAS was rendered all the more challenging by the Arab Spring, which tested the readiness and resolve of the new organisation. But the EEAS was able to react quickly to events and played its role as both a policy and donor coordinator. It has focused on democratic transformation and economic development; involvement with civil society and development solidarity, as set out in the offer of a Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity.

The EEAS also contributed to the wider international effort through the use of sanctions against the Gaddafi regime in Libya and the Assad regime in Syria. On Libya, the EEAS has led a diplomatic process which has resulted in a common position on Gaddafi, as well as recognition for the TNC – paving the way for Gaddafi's eventual overthrow.

Elsewhere in the region, Cathy has been working tirelessly on the Middle East Peace Process as a member of the Quartet; and, perhaps even more noteworthy has been her leadership role on the Iranian nuclear issue – not only on behalf of the EU but also the US, China and Russia. The sanctions which the international community has put in place, with the EU taking a particular lead, have been probably the single most powerful factor to induce the Iranians to agree to engage with the E3+3 on the substance of the file, rather than just take part in talks about talks.

Even as we reacted to events in the South, we haven't neglected the Eastern neighbourhood. We have helped eastern neighbours over the last decades to progress towards democracy and the Eastern Partnership has reinvigorated our support to this region. However, much remains to be done and we have seen some regrettable steps backwards in some countries which are still struggling with the transition towards democracy. But the message is clear that economic reforms must go hand in hand with true political reforms.

The Western Balkans poses a particular challenge in so far as we can help resolve outstanding tensions between Kosovo and Serbia, and more generally
in consolidating stability in the rest of the Balkans. We will continue to pay particular attention to Georgia and the South Caucasus.

We are also intensifying our relations with Turkey, which is becoming an ever more important partner in foreign policy, especially in the region.

In addition, the EU has intensified our ties with our strategic partners – the second of Cathy's principal policy priorities – whose support and close cooperation is essential if we want to address issues such as security, trade or climate change. The European Council Conclusions of September 2010 tasked HRVP Ashton to evaluate the prospects of relations with our strategic partners. The driving force of this exercise is to beef up the way we conduct our diplomacy by focusing more on core priorities, seeking greater policy and institutional coherence, and focusing on delivering results.

The transatlantic relationship is strong, not least due to the great relationship between Cathy Ashton and Hillary Clinton. There is lots of good work going on on specific issues, including Iran and also for instance on energy. We also have deepened the partnership with China by stepping up contacts with the Chinese leadership. We have a broad and busy agenda with Russia that spans all areas of Community competence (trade, mobility, energy) as well as political issues (Ukraine, South Caucasus, Transnistria). Ministers are considering how to improve political relations with India, Brazil and South Africa.

Finally, on the third of Cathy's priorities, the EU is increasingly looked to to help prevent conflict and manage crises. This will happen all the more, as the US gradually redefines its presence overseas. Libya, last year, was a clear example of this trend. So, the EU needs to continue the process already set in train after Lisbon of having a more integrated crisis response method, bringing together humanitarian/disaster relief and crisis management capabilities. This is also linked to peace-building and security policy, particularly conflict prevention, where the EU has developed successful tools such as the CSDP missions. Ultimately we want to flesh out the EU's capacity as a peace-builder through diplomacy, crisis management and development initiatives.

It's obviously far too early to judge the success or otherwise of this new architecture, and of the new job of Hi Rep and the new External Action Service in particular. But the experience of the past few months has been encouraging. There remains of course a lot to do, and the environment in which this work will be done will I am sure not get any easier. But personally I am convinced that a coherent, coordinated, and energetic approach – bringing together the Institutions and the member states – is the best way to project European values and defend European interests in an increasingly competitive and dangerous world.