

**Report on a Conference on the European External Action Service  
(EEAS), Europe House, London,  
22-23 November 2012  
Richard Seebom**

This event was set up by David Spence, now a Research Fellow at LSE and formerly in a range of relevant posts in the European Commission. It was sponsored by LSE and the Wyndham Place Charlemagne Trust. Of the 132 listed participants, many in mid-career, some 100 were present at times, though only about 40 for some keynote items.

There were three main themes: what the EEAS was supposed to be, what is going on now, and what ought to happen next.

The Lisbon Treaty, signed in December 2007, created the EEAS, but its coming into force was in question until November 2009 and so making it happen on 1 December 2010 was a bit of a scramble. For those whose noses are not on this grindstone, a vivid feel for the EEAS is given by a (video) talk by David O'Sullivan, its Chief Operating Officer, on 14 January 2011: if you listen to this you will hardly need to read more of my note.

<http://www.iiea.com/events/david-osullivan-chief-operating-officer-of-the-european-external-action-service>

The EEAS is headed by Cathy Ashton (Baroness on leave of absence) who is High Representative of the EU for Foreign and Security Policy and also Vice President of the European Commission. She was nominated for this post by Gordon Brown while Prime Minister. As such she chairs the EU Foreign Affairs Council. She has a strong CV, though it happens not to include an appointment endorsed by citizen voters; no one at the conference hinted that she was personally not up to the HR job. At the same time its impossibility was obvious, being so widely spread that she could not chair or attend all relevant meetings. She was said to have had a good relationship with Hilary Clinton. There was speculation about the 2014 reconfiguration of the EU leadership. The three key appointments – Council President, Commission President, High Representative – could have made or broken outcomes.

The EEAS is intended to manage the whole of the European Union's representation in third countries. The EU has a presence in some 120 of these, and some central reference point makes sense. From the Council and its secretariat come the manifestations of the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy. Both civil and military functions are within this, but any combat operations are for member state forces and inter-governmental management

(there is no European army – thank heavens). The Commission has managed to hang on to humanitarian assistance (ECHO) which includes ‘civil protection’ including a new emergency response centre; development assistance; energy policy; and EU enlargement: neighbourhood policy goes with this as well. Control of the EU’s borders is not something the EEAS can handle. Trade negotiations are also a Commission function. Staff management and budgetary procedures have had to follow Commission practice. Thirty per cent of EEAS staff are to be seconded from member state diplomatic services. The whole exercise has to be budgetarily neutral.

The EU has not been absent from the international scene, and perhaps some outcomes have highlighted the need for a central capability. At the meeting there was criticism of what had gone on in the western Balkans, where attempted nation-building and financial handouts had upstaged straight domestic economic development such as local oil refining. No one spoke of NATO.

So, what happened.

Firstly, the system is up and running. Heads of delegations have overall responsibility, but the staff carrying out functions still run by the Commission are separately managed. There are staffing issues of all kinds; the seconded newcomers are on four-year contracts and may have reentry problems when they go back home. If invited to stay on for another contract (perhaps in a different location), this may matter even more. Their spouses need consideration. There are language issues. In an embassy you know you are among your own kind. There are commitments to gender and geographical balance, but some smaller or newer member states have smaller pools to choose from and a danger of sucking them dry of talent. Heads of delegation are particularly hard to appoint. Training and achievement of a common ethos have been hard to fit in, with so many more urgent issues to resolve. Diplomatic passports can only be provided by member states with a national identity.

One insider saw delegations on the ground having to act immediately as the EU ‘without a mother ship at home’. In, for example, the Congo, there were multiple inherited agencies to be coordinated, including the military, even though actually responsible to member states and inter-governmental mandates. It could be hard to remember the Congolese themselves. Also, the locals might become too dependent on western handouts. I got the impression that Rwanda and Burundi were still to some extent Belgian fiefdoms.

Relations with member state embassies had not been stressful, but information flows were a matter of speculation – should you even look to NGOs like Human Rights Watch? But the EU was not a state and had no capacity to recognise states. This had come to a head at the UN in New York, where the member states who happened to hold the rotating presidency had seats in the General Assembly, whilst now the EU or EEAS could be no more than an observer. Geneva, with many specialised UN offshoots and the World Trade Organisation, had been a bit chaotic, with no head of delegation for a year.

The demise of the rotating Council presidency seemed to have come as something of a relief, partly because long-term negotiations no longer had interruptions. (There is still a rotating presidency for subordinate non-foreign Council business.) With all responsibility ultimately falling on the High Representative and her Cabinet, there was understandably a pipeline problem in gaining access. It was all the same felt that Baroness Ashton had made a good start. Her personal priorities were crisis management and nation-building. (It is only after the event that I heard an insider comment that she has the insouciance at times of going into meetings without looking at her office briefing.)

As David O’Sullivan says in the talk I have mentioned, the EEAS in Brussels has to be ready for the telephone to ring with the latest terrorist coup or natural disaster – the EU earned brownie points for its involvement in Haiti.

Where in particular is more thought and experimentation called for?

One speaker (Slovakian) reminded us that the French first had the machine gun for their 1870 war with Germany. This got them nowhere, as they saw it as a rapid firing addition to the artillery. (Since then I have seen the 1914 British infantry training manual, complete with the warning that alternative propositions were forbidden. This treated the machine gun as a rapid-firing infantry rifle, with a catastrophic disregard for its enfilade potential.) The point of this digression is that the EEAS has not yet been conceptualised to make the most of its potential. It was clear that the EU hadn’t had a policy heart, in spite of its strong trade and economic relationships with other world powers. It needs a political attitude to China, Russia, Japan...

There are particular relationships to be explored. We heard from an MEP, pointing out that the Parliament has a say in the budget and over appointments. But it remains to be seen whether its powers will suddenly surface in effective interventions. Communication problems do not seem to have arisen. Similarly (in a way) we heard about the problems of OSCE

trying to implement human rights policies in the former Soviet territories. EEAS may get a better grip than has been the case hitherto – the body badly needs an external stimulus.

At the centre, the relations between retained Commission roles and the CFSP could be helped by the High Representative making more of her Commission Vice-President hat. Partly in this context, it needs to be recognised that the carrot of EU membership gives less bargaining power for the promotion of good governance in neighbourhood countries than it once did. States that achieve development may create elites feathering their nests, but these may need effective property and contract law, so that nation building may often be clunky.

One headache area for all foreign representation is how to manage consular services. Lost passports and brushes with the local law lead on to nationality problems and asylum. Even the most minor cases can be very resource intensive. The existence of EEAS might lead member states to close some posts, but asking it to take on consular work is not really on the horizon. Article 23 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU has the words:

*Every citizen of the Union shall, in the territory of a third country in which the Member State of which he is a national is not represented, be entitled to protection by the diplomatic or consular authorities of any Member State, on the same conditions as the nationals of that State.*

But to take over such a role the EEAS would need to know the rule books of all the member states potentially involved. The EU cannot represent an individual in a court of law.

Finally, there were a number of passing mentions of non-state actors. There are NGOs – the International Red Cross has offices all over the world. There are also transnational corporations with turnover and hence influence greater than many a member state. Many policy moves come from the UN such as sanctions, which the EU must respect and implement. Also policy initiatives by individual nations can overtake collective responses which need multi-national agreement. Think of Canada and land mines. But the EEAS can give the EU a capacity for world stabilisation that has yet to be thought through.

**Richard Seebohm** is a member of the British Committee that supports the Brussels-based Quaker Council for European Affairs, and a member of the Committee of Faith in Europe.