

RESETTING EU EXTERNAL ACTION: POTENTIAL AND CONSTRAINTS

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SUMMARY

The appointment of new leaders at the top of the European institutions in 2014 and the ambitious review calendar for 2015 have raised expectations that the European Union (EU) will finally 'get real' about its common foreign policy. This policy paper puts these expectations into perspective and formulates recommendations for more coherent, efficient, and strategic external action.

1. The comprehensive approach and implementation gaps

One of the key principles of EU external action is the comprehensive approach, referring to the strategic and coherent use of civilian and military instruments towards collective, overarching objectives. European decision-makers generally recognise its strategic, political, and financial advantages and tend to present comprehensiveness as the EU's key added value. However, the Union still suffers from important implementation gaps.

2. Five years after Lisbon: the good, the bad, and the ugly

A review of the five past years of EU external action offers some insights into the origins of these implementation gaps. The institutional innovations introduced by the Lisbon Treaty (2009) triggered some important learning and socialisation processes. New coordination mechanisms were introduced that enhanced the coherence of external action. However, coordination between the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Commission was still limited and socialisation dynamics did not (yet) bridge all the cultural barriers within the EEAS. In addition, new inter- and intra-institutional overlaps in terms of competences and resources provoked tensions and turf wars.

Deficient coordination and tensions can be traced back to four overarching issues: the lack of a real strategy; the unclear 'finality' of the comprehensive approach; the asymmetric distribution of responsibilities between the EU member states and institutions; and the structural division between political guidance (EEAS) and resources (Commission).

3. The new legislature: potential and constraints

The new leaders and recent institutional reforms will certainly remedy some of the political and institutional challenges encountered during the past five years. The fact that the EU is slowly emerging from recession should also be conducive to a more outward-looking perspective. However, some open questions remain: Will the Commission continue to play the old 'turf game' concerning the financial instruments? How could the EEAS be streamlined? How will the European Council President and the High Representative divide foreign policy tasks? How will the High Representative structure strategic rethinking? And how will she manage her multiple tasks without disappointing someone?

In answering these questions, the EU's new leaders should learn from past successes and failures. More concretely, they should:

- **Foster more systematic coordination:** There is no need for more, but rather for more systematic coordination. This entails a better identification of relevant thematic interfaces between the various areas of EU external action with their different time frames.
 - **Streamline to prevent turf wars:** A clear delineation of competences should sometimes be preferred over increased coordination. Streamlining would also imply reducing the number of coordinating positions within the EEAS.
 - **Think and act more strategically:** The High Representative should launch a gradual process of strategic rethinking. The final output should depend on real substance and added value. However, strategic rethinking should not stand in the way of timely and visible EU action when external developments call for it.
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To work together, that is the number one challenge

Federica Mogherini,
Brussels, 6 October 2014

INTRODUCTION: NEW LEADERS – HIGH EXPECTATIONS

In December 2003, the European Council published the European Security Strategy, which starts by declaring that “Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free”¹. A decade later, the situation differs. Europe is struggling to emerge from recession; the European Council declares that “instability in our wider neighbourhood is at an all-time high”²; and acute terrorist threats from within and without Europe trigger intense intra-European debates on the right balance between freedom and security.

In reaction to the unseen accumulation of crises in Europe’s neighbourhood, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker made “a stronger Europe when it comes to foreign policy” one of his political priorities³. At the European Parliament (EP) confirmation hearing in October 2014, the then-designate High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Commission Vice-President (HR/VP), Federica Mogherini, equally emphasised the need “to shape a real common foreign policy”⁴.

This atmosphere of departure in Brussels suggests that the time to ‘get serious’ about European Union (EU) foreign policy is finally ripe. The internal review calendar for 2015 confirms this impression and raises expectations that the Union’s new political leadership will ‘reset’ its strategic vision for security and the neighbourhood (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 ▶ Key steps of the EU’s ‘strategic reset’

UPCOMING REVIEWS	RESPONSIBLE	DEADLINE
Internal review of the structures of the European External Action Service (EEAS)	HR/VP	February 2015
Action Plan on improved working practices	HR/VP and Commission	First quarter of 2015
European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) Review	HR/VP and Commission	Third quarter of 2015
EEAS Review	HR/VP	Last quarter of 2015
Assessment of changes in global environment and of challenges and opportunities arising for the Union	HR/VP and Commission after consultation with member states	‘In the course of 2015’

Source: own compilation.

The aim of this policy paper is to put these expectations into perspective. It reviews the five past years of the institutions’ implementation of external action and assesses why expectations arising from the innovations introduced by the Lisbon Treaty (2009) have, to a large extent, been disappointed. The paper then evaluates

1. European Council, „European Security Strategy – A Secure Europe in a better world”, Brussels, 12-13 December 2003.

2. European Council, „Strategic Agenda for the Union in times of change”, 26-27 June 2014.

3. Jean-Claude Juncker, „A New Start for Europe: My Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change”, Strasbourg, 15 July 2014.

4. Federica Mogherini, „Hearing in the Foreign Affairs Committee”, European Parliament, Brussels, 6 October 2014.

the potential of the new political leaders and institutional structures to remedy existing shortfalls and formulates respective policy recommendations. The analysis draws on insights from the relevant policy and academic literature as well as 50 expert interviews with EU and national officials conducted between June 2011 and January 2015⁵.

1. The comprehensive approach and implementation gaps

At the beginning of her opening statement at the EP confirmation hearing, Mogherini listed three elements that should allow the Union to ‘pull its full weight’ on the international stage: ownership and a shared vision of the member states; inter-institutional coordination; and horizontal coordination among the EU’s external policies. Thereby, she based her initial vision for the term on key pillars of the Union’s so-called ‘comprehensive approach’.

TABLE 2 ▶ The 2003 European Security Strategy at a glance

Key threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Terrorism • Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction • Regional conflicts • State failure • Organised crime
Core principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflict prevention • Holistic approach combining military and civilian instruments • Effective multilateralism
Geographic focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU Neighbourhood
Key partner countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • United States • Russia • Japan, China, Canada and India
Key partner organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • United Nations • World Trade Organization • NATO • OSCE • Council of Europe • International Criminal Court • ASEAN, MERCOSUR and the African Union
Ambitions for EU security policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More active in pursuit of strategic objectives • More capable in terms of military and civilian instruments • More coherent by bringing together different instruments and activities

Source: European Council, 2003.

The comprehensive approach is firmly anchored in the 2003 European Security Strategy and has become an important organising principle of EU external action during the past decade (*see Table 2*). It can be defined as the strategic, consistent, and coordinated use of political, economic, and military instruments, policies, and resources towards collective, overarching objectives. The responsibility for its implementation is shared between EU institutions and member states.

Calls for a more comprehensive EU external action are typically based on three overlapping arguments. The first is of strategic nature and related to the growing number of interlinked threats and challenges around Europe. In 2014, the Union’s focus shifted away from internal euro crisis management and towards external crises as the neighbourhood turned into a “ring of fire”⁶. These crises have also increasingly been felt ‘at home’.

5. The interviews were conducted in French, German, English, and Spanish. All quotes were translated by the author. Most interviewees spoke on the condition of anonymity and indicated a generic position description for referencing.

6. *The Economist*, „Europe’s ring of fire”, Charlemagne, 20 September 2014.

The terrorist attack on the French satirical weekly magazine *Charlie Hebdo* on 7 January 2015 dramatically illustrated the extent to which lines between internal and external security blur. The threat posed by foreign fighters returning from training camps in countries like Yemen, Syria or Iraq has suddenly become very real. While the current accumulation and transnationalisation of crises might seem exceptional, policy-makers acknowledged that we will see more of the same and that ‘crisis will become the new normal’. As Mogherini noted during her EP hearing, “crises (...) do not queue up and wait for us (...). We will need to do all at the same time altogether, otherwise [we] will not be effective”⁷.

The second argument is of political nature and is linked to the effectiveness of EU external action. Europe needs to act together in order to attain collective objectives and to promote its values in an increasingly multipolar world. Collectively, the EU is the world’s biggest trading bloc as well as its largest development and humanitarian aid donor. Pulling this economic weight towards common objectives is also an essential precondition for the exertion of ‘soft’ and potentially even coercive power (as in the case of economic sanctions).

The third argument is financial and related to efficiency. It is based on the recognition that a more coordinated approach reduces duplication while increasing the potential for synergy. This argument certainly seems valid after years of economic austerity from which the EU still struggles to emerge. The effects of austerity have been particularly felt in the area of defence, where expenditures had already been on a course of decline since the end of the Cold War. As a result of austerity, almost all EU member states cut their defence budgets. In some smaller member states, cuts amounted to one third⁸. As Table 3 shows, the EU’s defence expenditures as a percentage of GDP gradually dropped from 1.5% in 2008 to 1.34% in 2013.

TABLE 3 ▶ EU and US defence expenditure (2008-2009)⁹

YEAR	EU TOTAL EXPENDITURES IN CURRENT USD BN	AS % OF GDP	US TOTAL EXPENDITURES IN CURRENT USD BN	AS % OF GDP
2008	311.5	1.5%	621	4.3%
2009	294	1.6%	669	4.3%
2010	279	1.5%	698	4.8%
2011	289	1.38%	711	4.8%
2012	271	1.36%	685	4.4%
2013	273	1.34%	640	3.8%

Source: own compilation based on data from the SIPRI military expenditure database.

Budgetary constraints also affected the EU’s collective output in the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The number of EU civilian and military personnel deployed diminished by 1.677, and thus roughly 25%, between 2010 and 2014 (see Table 4). There is thus a clear rationale for pooling scarce resources towards collective goals in order to achieve more with less.

7. Mogherini, „Hearing in the Foreign Affairs Committee”, *ibid.*

8. Christian Mölling, „Europa ohne Verteidigung”, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, *SWP-Aktuell*, 56, 2011.

9. The data excludes Denmark due to its opt-out from the Common Security and Defence Policy and Croatia as it only joined the EU in July 2013.

TABLE 4 ► Personnel in EU missions and operations (2010-2014)

YEAR	MILITARY PERSONNEL	POLICE PERSONNEL	CIVILIAN PERSONNEL	TOTAL
2010	3.977	1.692	1.112	6.781
2011	3.066	1.445	2.144	6.655
2012	2.044	1.191	897	4.132
2013	2.943	932	1.139	5.014
2014	3.205	993	906	5.104

Source: Center for International Peace Operations (ZIF).

While European decision-makers continuously emphasise the importance of the comprehensive approach, its implementation remains suboptimal. In 2013, the European Commission and the HR/VP noted that the “the ideas and principles governing the comprehensive approach have yet to become, systematically, the guiding principles for EU external action across all areas”¹⁰. More recently, in May 2014, the Council emphasised the need to strengthen the implementation of the comprehensive approach and invited the HR/VP and the Commission to present a respective action plan by March 2015¹¹. The key question is: why is implementation deficient and how could it be improved?

2. Five years after Lisbon: the good, the bad, and the ugly

The Lisbon Treaty carried the promise of a more coherent and effective EU external action. This promise was particularly nourished by the creation of the post of the double-hatted HR/VP and the creation of the EEAS, both with a clear mandate to ensure coherence¹². Five years later, many policy analysts and decision-makers feel that Lisbon’s promise remained unfulfilled¹³. The following assesses to what extent this is the case by reviewing progress as well as the most salient institutional and political difficulties encountered between 2009 and 2014.

2.1. ‘The good’: an ongoing learning process

One of the key achievements of former HR/VP Catherine Ashton was setting up the EEAS from scratch and amidst institutional rivalries and member state competition for posts. The arrival of this new institution triggered important internal learning and socialisation processes¹⁴.

“MANY POLICY ANALYSTS AND DECISION-MAKERS FEEL THAT LISBON’S PROMISE REMAINED UNFULFILLED”

New coordination mechanisms were put in place and tested through ‘learning-by-doing’. One example is the so-called Crisis Platform bringing together top officials from relevant EEAS and Commission services on an ad hoc basis and in relation to specific crises. It was, for instance, activated in the context of the Libyan (2011), Syrian (2011 and 2012) and Malian (2013) crises. EEAS officials generally agreed that the Platform facilitated cross-institutional coordination and information-sharing, and thus contributed to more comprehensive crisis responses¹⁵.

10. HR/VP and European Commission, „The EU’s comprehensive approach to external conflict and crises - Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council”, Brussels, 11 December 2013.

11. Council of the European Union, „Council conclusions on the EU’s comprehensive approach”, Brussels, 12 May 2014.

12. See Articles 18(4) and 27(3), TEU.

13. Interview with Eneko Landaburu, 19 December 2014.

14. Socialisation refers to the process of adopting social norms, values, or identities through intense and repeated social interaction within a given collective. In this case, it refers to the adoption of common institutional or organisational norms and values within the EEAS.

15. Interviews with EEAS officials, 2012 and 2013.

Furthermore, two parallel reviews structured the Union’s internal learning process: the 2013 EEAS Review¹⁶ and the revision of the crisis management procedures dating from 2003. The former identified some of the key flaws of the EEAS’s first operational years and made concrete proposals for short- to medium-term adjustments. Meanwhile, the revision of the crisis management procedures adapted the planning process for EU missions and operations to make it more coherent and comprehensive¹⁷.

One of the key innovations in this regard was the introduction of the ‘Political Framework for Crisis Approach’ (PFCA), a document drafted under the auspices of the relevant EEAS Managing Director, which outlines the parameters of the crisis, the motives for collective action, and potential response options. This procedure has now been applied three times: for Ukraine in June 2014 as well as for Libya and the Central African Republic in October 2014. An EU insider singled out the Libyan PFCA as an example to follow. It was drafted in less than a month and outlined different future scenarios, their potential impact on EU interests and values as well as common priorities and response options¹⁸.

“THERE HAS BEEN AN ‘UNBELIEVABLE INTENSIFICATION OF COOPERATION WITHIN THE EEAS’”

The EEAS had started out with important internal cultural barriers due to its nature as a hybrid institution including former Commission and Council Secretariat officials as well as national diplomats. However, by 2013, an EEAS official remarked that there had been an “unbelievable intensification of cooperation within the EEAS” and that a common esprit de corps was “gradually flourishing”¹⁹.

In the early days of her mandate, Ashton received ample criticism for her lack of foreign policy expertise and leadership; her supposed disinterest in security and defence; as well as her management style and personality²⁰. However, in the second half of her term, assessments were much more positive. The so-called “CSDP fatigue” – prevalent between 2008 and 2012 when only new CSDP operation was launched – was overcome. In the following two years Ashton contributed to the deployment of eight new CSDP missions or operations with a total of 1.621 international staff (see Table 5). In addition, she was praised for two diplomatic achievements:

- her contribution to reaching an interim agreement with Iran on its nuclear program in November 2013; and
- her constructive role in the negotiations leading to an agreement normalising relations between Kosovo and Serbia in April 2013.

TABLE 5 ► CSDP operations and missions (2008-2014)

NAME	TYPE	DURATION	PERSONNEL*
EUTM Somalia	Military training	Since 2010	125
EUFOR Libya	Military operation	Planned in 2011 but not launched	/
EUAVSEC South Sudan	Aviation security	2012-2014	34
EUCAP Sahel Niger	Rule of law	Since 2012	56
EUCAP Nestor, Djibouti, Somalia, Seychelles, Tanzania, Yemen	Maritime capacity building	Since 2012	86
EUBAM Libya	Border assistance	Since 2013	110
EUTM Mali	Military training	Since 2013	560
EUCAP Sahel Mali	Civilian Security Sector Reform	Since 2014	18
EUFOR Central African Republic	Military operation	Since 2014	700
EUAM Ukraine	Civilian Security Sector Reform	Since 2014	57

Source: Council of the European Union, 2014-15.

* Personnel numbers include international but exclude local staff. They are approximate and based on the status quo in 2014.

16. EEAS, „EEAS Review”, Brussels, July 2013.

17. EEAS, „Suggestions for crisis management procedures for CSDP crisis management operations”, Brussels, 18 June 2013.

18. EEAS, „Libya, a Political Framework for a Crisis Approach”, Brussels, 1 October 2014.

19. Interview with an EEAS official, 12 April 2013.

20. Niklas Helwig and Carolin Rürger, „In Search of a Role for the High Representative: The Legacy of Catherine Ashton”, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), *The International Spectator*, vol. 49 no. 4, 2014, pp. 1-17.

As this brief overview of institutional and political achievements in the post-Lisbon period shows, the promise of the Lisbon Treaty has not been completely disappointed. A number of important learning and socialisation processes have been triggered and the foundations of a foreign policy and security *acquis* have been laid. However, these developments were not without frictions.

2.2. 'The bad': limits of coordination and socialisation

One of the recurrent criticisms directed at the first post-Lisbon HR/VP concerned her inability to bring together the EEAS and the Commission and thus to live up to her double-hatted position. According to a senior Commission advisor, she was "often absent from college meetings (due also to her crowded agenda)"²¹. In addition, she failed to convene the dedicated Group of External Relations Commissioners. Seemingly, she was not helped by then Commission President José Manuel Barroso who did not empower her to do so²².

WORKING-LEVEL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE EEAS AND THE COMMISSION SUFFERED FROM A LACK OF COMMUNICATION AND INTERACTION"

between the Commission and the EEAS"²⁴.

In addition, working-level relations between the EEAS and the Commission suffered from a lack of communication and interaction. An EEAS official that had previously worked with the Commission criticised the bureaucratisation of information exchange with former colleagues²³. Before he could simply call and ask for information but after his transfer to the EEAS, information exchange was subjected to complicated procedures. Inter-institutional coordination and communication problems also led national officials to question the added value of the HR/VP and EEAS. As a French diplomat put it, "Before, DG RELEX was part of the Commission. Now, there is something like an extra layer

Though more specific coordination mechanisms such as the Crisis Platform were useful, they did not bridge long-standing structural barriers within and across institutions. These are traditionally located at the intersection between shorter-term security policy and longer-term development cooperation as well as between civilian and military structures. According to an official from the EU Military Staff, the Crisis Platform improved coordination at the top of the hierarchy but not at the working level where duplication continued²⁵. In addition, the ad hoc use of the Crisis Platform did not ensure "intelligent sequencing", namely smooth transitions between the activities in the realm of the CSDP and longer-term Commission measures²⁶.

Finally, it is questionable to what extent the gradually flourishing EEAS *esprit de corps* extends to national diplomats. The latter only work with the EEAS for a limited time period before returning to national capitals and/or career paths. Interviewed EEAS officials that had previously worked with the Commission or Council Secretariat questioned whether national diplomats would adopt a common EEAS *esprit de corps* or rather pursue national interests in loyalty to their longer-term employer. In practice, the picture might be mixed. In the longer term, the exchange with national diplomats could also lead to the gradual Europeanisation of national foreign ministries. However, the expressed doubts show that this development is likely to take some more years during which cultural barriers and mistrust live on in the EEAS.

21. Interview with a senior Commission advisor, 8 June 2011.

22. Stefan Lehne, „A window of opportunity to upgrade foreign policy“, Carnegie Europe, May 2014.

23. Interview with an EEAS official, 9 June 2011.

24. Interview with a French diplomat, 8 June 2011.

25. Interview with an EUMS official, 2 March 2012.

26. Interview with a European diplomat, 4 June 2013.

2.3. 'The ugly': defending turf and national interests

Lisbon's innovations also gave rise to tensions and turf wars between the EEAS on the one hand and the Council Secretariat and Commission on the other. There were, for instance, bureaucratic struggles between the EEAS Department for Crisis Response and Operational Coordination created in 2010 and the Commission DG for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO). The former was responsible for strategic coordination while the latter held the funds and refused to be coordinated by the EEAS. Similarly, DG Home was reluctant to cooperate with the EEAS on comprehensive migration responses, for instance, regarding Libya and the Sahel zone²⁷. A senior Commission Advisor also spoke of tensions between the HR/VP and the former Trade Commissioner²⁸.

These animosities were compounded by tensions within the EEAS. The 2013 EEAS Review underlined the need for clearer reporting lines within the crisis management structures and for their better integration with other parts of the EEAS. It was, for instance, unclear to what extent the Department for Crisis Response and Operational Coordination was responsible for crisis management and at what point it had to hand over the responsibility to other players such as the EU Military Staff.

Another source of tensions was the unclear positioning of the EU Special Representatives within the EEAS (see Table 6). They were not integrated within the hierarchy but stood directly under the HR/VP's authority. One example where this configuration caused frictions was the relationship between the EEAS Sahel Coordinator and the EU Special Representative for the Sahel whose competences overlapped. According to a British diplomat the member states preferred to liaise with the EU Special Representative who was more responsive to them than to other EU institutions²⁹. This set-up created inter-positional rivalries.

TABLE 6 ► EU Special Representatives

PORTFOLIO	FIRST APPOINTED	CURRENT INCUMBENT
Afghanistan	2001	Franz-Michael Skjold Mellbin
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2002	Peter Sørensen
South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia	2008	Herbert Salber
Kosovo	2008	Samuel Žbogar
Horn of Africa	2011	Alexander Rondos
Southern Mediterranean	2011	Bernardino León
Human Rights	2012	Stavros Lambrinidis
Sahel	2013	Michel Dominique Reveyard-de Menthon

Source: [EEAS](#), January 2015.

2.4. Four overarching issues

Inter and intra-institutional tensions were symptomatic of some broader issues linked to the comprehensive approach. The first is the Union's lack of an up-to-date foreign policy or security strategy. Some analysts suggest that the comprehensive approach was used as a substitute for a real strategy³⁰. According to Eneko Landaburu, former Director General for External Relations of the European Commission (2003-2009), Ashton failed to use her role as first permanent chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Council to forge a more strategic

27. Interview with an EEAS official, 11 April 2013.

28. Interview with a senior Commission advisor, 8 June 2011.

29. Interview with a British diplomat, 28 November 2013.

30. Nick Witney et. al., „Rebooting EU Foreign Policy”, European Council on Foreign Relations, no. 114, September 2014.

debate on the common interests and priorities of the Union³¹. In the EEAS Review, she mentioned the comprehensive approach as one of the key elements that had emerged from the first two operational years of the service. However, the comprehensive approach is not exactly new, and while it represents an important method to pursue collective goals, setting them remains a task for political and institutional leaders.

This leads us to the second issue which concerns the ultimate objectives or finality of the comprehensive approach. Perspectives thereon vary depending on where ‘you sit’. This ambiguity nourished the suspicion that the comprehensive approach was being used to subordinate longer-term development to shorter-term security objectives and vice versa. Military officials, for instance, had a tendency to view it as a means to devalue the military component within external action³². They repeatedly accused Ashton of neglecting the defence part and of promoting an exclusively civilian role for the EU. She was, for instance, heavily criticised for failing to attend an informal NATO-EU Defence Ministers meeting in Mallorca in February 2010³³. Conversely, officials in development and humanitarian aid feared that the EEAS aimed at politicising or militarising aid under the cover of the comprehensive approach.

The third overarching issue is linked to the shared responsibility of EU institutions and member states for implementing the comprehensive approach. The first post-Lisbon years showed that the HR/VP’s room for manoeuvre in ensuring consistency among member states depended on the configuration of national interests. When national stakes were high or interests diverged, the HR/VP and EEAS were often pushed to the sidelines. This scenario unfolded in the Libyan crisis in spring 2011 when the divided member states prevented the HR/VP from meeting with Libyan opposition representatives. It could also be observed in the 2013 Malian crisis where the EEAS’s role was reduced to adapting and “soft-washing” French-drafted Council Conclusions³⁴ (see Box 1). The responsibility for implementing the comprehensive approach may thus be shared in theory, but in practice the member states often determine the division of labour.

BOX 1 ► French and EU responses to the 2013 Malian crisis

In 2012, France repeatedly warned other EU member states about the deterioration of the security situation in the Sahel zone in general, and Mali in particular. However, the other member states did not share the French sense of urgency and threat perception and were reluctant to act. In October 2012, they eventually agreed to the deployment of a military training operation (EUTM Mali) in the framework of the CSDP and as part of a broader international engagement.

While preparations for EUTM Mali were dragging on, the crisis escalated in early January 2013 when Islamist fighters marched towards Bamako. Following a request for assistance by the Malian President and consultations with the HR/VP and selected EU member states, France intervened militarily within 24 hours to successfully halt the Islamist offensive.

The French intervention was immediately endorsed by all other EU member states, some of which also offered logistical support. Although none of them pledged troops, they accelerated the EU’s crisis response and fast-tracked the procedure for the deployment of EUTM Mali. In spring 2013, the EU became Mali’s lead development aid donor with a significant French contribution.

The Malian crisis can be seen as an example where one member state with high stakes was willing to lead the EU’s crisis management efforts diplomatically, financially, and militarily. It also showed how such an asymmetry in national threat perceptions and interests can constrain the room for manoeuvre of the HR/VP and EEAS, at least during the early stages of crisis response³⁵.

“ THE COMMISSION FEARED THAT THE EEAS WOULD RESTRAIN ITS ALREADY DIMINISHED ROLE IN EXTERNAL ACTION ”

Finally, the HR/VP and EEAS are responsible for the overall political coordination of EU external action but the responsibility for the implementation of the budget remains in the Commission. According to the Council Decision establishing the EEAS, the service should “contribute to the programming and management cycle” for the financial instruments³⁶. However, the Commission limited the EEAS’s involvement as it feared that it would restrain its

31. Interview, 19 December 2014.

32. Interview with a European diplomat, 5 June 2013.

33. Helwig and Rütger, „In Search of a Role for the High Representative”, *op. cit.*

34. Interview with a European diplomat, 4 June 2013.

35. Nicole Koenig, *The quest for coherence: a comparative analysis of EU crisis management in Africa*, PhD thesis, 2014.

36. Council of the European Union, „Council Decision of 26 July 2010 establishing the organisation and functioning of the European External Action Service”, Brussels.

already diminished role in external action. The repeated push by the member states for the flexibilisation of the financial regulations reinforced the suspicion that the EEAS was acting as a ‘Trojan horse’ for national interests. The results were not only tensions but also the lack or delay of financing for a number of measures in the realm of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and in crisis management in particular.

BOX 2 ► Comprehensive approach – overarching problems

1. Lack of a real strategy setting overarching objectives
 2. Unclear ‘finality’ of the comprehensive approach
 3. Asymmetric distribution of responsibilities between member states and EU institutions
 4. Structural division between political guidance (EEAS) and resources (Commission)
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3. The new legislature: potential and constraints

The EP elections on 22-25 May 2014 marked the beginning of a new legislature. New political leaders were appointed and a number of institutional reforms triggered. These developments have the potential remedy some, but not all of the long-standing obstacles to coherent and effective EU external action.

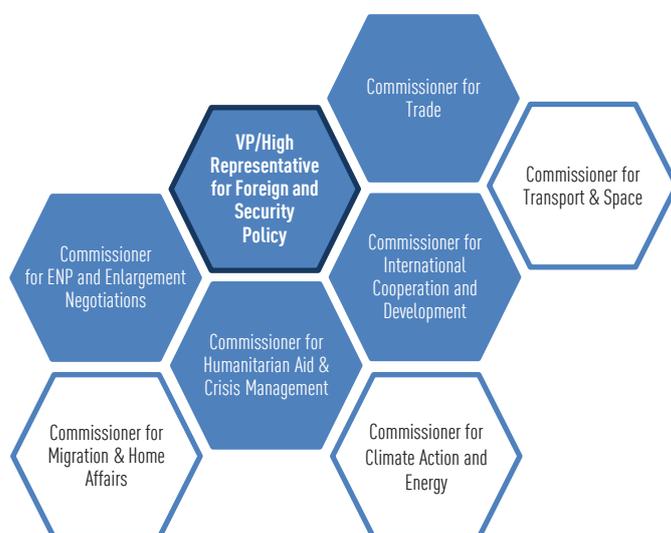
3.1. Fresh potential: clustering external action and reviving defence

One of the most salient institutional changes was the activation of the cluster on external action coordinated by the HR/VP and bringing together the Commissioners for ENP and Enlargement Negotiations; Trade; International Cooperation and Development; and Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management (*see Figure 1*). The cluster had already been foreseen by the Lisbon Treaty³⁷. However, now it is to meet at least monthly in varying thematic and/or geographic formats, according to the needs identified by the Commission President or HR/VP. On a case-by-case basis it will also include the Commissioners responsible for internal policies with an external dimension such as migration, climate, energy, and transport. Landaburu expressed the general sense of optimism with which the activation of the cluster was received in Brussels and EU capitals: “Regular meetings between concerned Commissioners will certainly lead to more effectiveness in our external action”³⁸.

37. Art. 18 (4), TEU, see also António Vitorino and Yves Bertoincini, „The Commission Reform: Between efficiency and legitimacy”, *Policy Paper No. 115*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, July 2014.

38. Landaburu, Interview, *op. cit.*

FIGURE 1 ► European Commission – external relations cluster



Source: own compilation.

In addition, Mogherini is likely to have a more pronounced coordinating function between the EEAS and the Commission. Her mission letter announced a “pragmatic partnership” with the Commission President that will enable her to play the “role as a Commission Vice-President to the full and help ensure a more effective external action”³⁹. To emphasise her more prominent role in the Commission, Mogherini moved her office to the Commission’s Berlaymont building. Half of her cabinet is constituted of Commission officials and she appointed an experienced Commission player, Stefano Manservigi, as head of cabinet. The HR/VP’s more marked ‘Commission profile’ could help lower tensions and rivalries between the two institutions. In addition, she will be able to rely on a system of flexible, content-based deputising, which should enhance her ability to juggle her various ‘hats’.

The HR/VP also stated that she would use her first 100 days in office to review and streamline the internal structure of the EEAS. She underlined the need to assess the delineation of competences within the crisis management structures and to improve their integration within the service. This review might remedy some of the duplication and infighting observed during the EEAS’s first operational years.

In addition, Mogherini announced that she strives to play the “defence role at full”⁴⁰. She explained that security and defence would perhaps not be priority number one, but within “the first circle of priorities”. The fact that she chaired her first informal Defence Ministers Council less than three weeks into office can be seen as an initial sign that she is willing to revalue the defence component within the comprehensive approach.

“ THE POTENTIAL FOR A FRESH START IN EU EXTERNAL ACTION IS CLEARLY THERE ”

Overall, the EU’s new political leadership and structural changes have the potential to enhance EEAS-Commission coordination and to improve interaction within the EEAS. Mogherini has a clear advantage over her predecessor as she starts with a sympathy bonus. She can learn from Ashton’s mistakes and successes and build on her political and institutional legacy. In addition, she has a declared willingness to bridge imbalances and tensions related to the finality of the comprehensive approach. The potential for a fresh start in EU external action is thus clearly there.

39. Jean-Claude Juncker, „Mission letter to the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Policy and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission”, Brussels, 1 November 2014.

40. Mogherini, „Hearing in the Foreign Affairs Committee”, *op. cit.*

3.2. Open questions: resources, coordination and strategy

It is too early to draw any conclusions on the real impact of the new structures and political leaders on the effectiveness and coherence of EU external action. However, the juxtaposition of old challenges and fresh potential allows for reflection on some unaddressed challenges related to yet unanswered questions.

The first open question is whether the Commission will continue playing the 'old turf game' based on its exclusive responsibility for budget implementation. A fundamental change in setup is unlikely at this stage. According to an EEAS official, a complete transfer of the Commission's Service for Financial Policy Instruments to the EEAS would make EU external action more reactive and effective⁴¹. However, the Commission's political will to make concessions on its budgetary authority is not there.

The next question concerns the division of labour between the HR/VP and the European Council President. The Treaty foresees that the latter represents the Union externally and with regard to CFSP, at his level and without prejudice to the powers of the HR/VP⁴². Herman van Rompuy took a backstage role in foreign affairs, due also to his important focus on euro crisis management⁴³. His successor, Donald Tusk, is keener to engage with foreign policy. He notably included the crisis in Ukraine as well as EU-Russia relations amongst his top priorities. Tensions might arise between Mogherini, who is said to pursue a softer line on Russia, and the more 'hawkish' Tusk. First tensions surfaced when Mogherini leaked an options paper proposing a gradual roll-back on sanctions to the press prior to the Foreign Affairs Council meeting on 19 January 2015. Member state representatives distanced themselves from the paper and argued that it did not reflect the EU's collective line⁴⁴. They were not pleased with the fact that it had been leaked without prior consultation and referred to the European Council meeting in March 2015 as preferred framework for discussion.

An open question which is due to be answered within the coming weeks is what direction the HR/VP's assessment of the EEAS structures will take. This relates to the question of how much coordination is needed and where the right balance between synergies and de-confliction lies. Several EU officials expressed a sense of frustration about endless coordination processes that rather resembled 'tick-the-box' exercises than effective meetings with concrete results.

When asked in the EP hearing who should be responsible for strategic rethinking in Europe, Mogherini answered: "I guess me, yes. I can confirm that"⁴⁵. However, she also admitted that she had no "clear idea" on the shape this rethinking would take. Calls for a revision of the 2003 European Security Strategy have been around for some time. In 2012, Italy, Poland, Spain, and Sweden, initiated the "think tank process for a European Global Strategy" that would feed into a revised strategic document⁴⁶. However, results of this and other think tank processes⁴⁷ only had feeble resonance with European decision-makers⁴⁸.

There are at least three reasons that explain the past reluctance to review the European Security Strategy: differences in national strategic cultures; limited bureaucratic capacity (and/or will) in the member states and the EEAS to work out a draft; and the question of the added value of a new strategic document⁴⁹. While the strategic environment has no doubt changed since 2003, the question is to what extent the Union's collective approach to it has. The next question is whether a new strategic document – necessarily a compromise between 28 member states – will change EU external action in practice.

41. Interview with an EEAS official, 18 December 2014.

42. Art. 15(6)d, TEU.

43. Herman van Rompuy, Speech, „Five Years as President of the European Council: lessons and challenges“, Paris, 25 November 2014. Speech published as a Tribune by Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute.

44. Andrew Rettman, „Russia finds few friends in EU sanctions talks“, *EUObserver*, 20 January 2015.

45. *Ibid.*

46. For more information, see: „Towards a European Global Strategy“.

47. Jacques Delors Institute notably implemented an initiative entitled „Think Global – Act European“ bringing together 16 European think tanks with the aim of contributing to a broader discussion on the EU's new challenges and existing instruments.

48. Interview with a think tank expert, 6 June 2013.

49. Interview with a European diplomat, 5 June 2013.

“SOONER OR LATER,
MOGHERINI WILL HAVE TO
DISAPPOINT SOMEONE”

This leads us to a final question regarding the level of ambition of the new leaders. In her hearing, Mogherini emphasised: “We have to set (...) high expectations. You can always lower them on the way but you need to start thinking big”⁵⁰. Mogherini is arguably still in a ‘honeymoon period’, also due to the relative unpopularity of her predecessor and the sense of ‘exhaustion’ that constant institutional infighting had created. However, this might quickly change once ambitions touch ground. Will she find the right balance between the EEAS and the Commission; the Foreign Affairs Council; the EP; and her various external commitments⁵¹? As an EEAS official put it, “sooner or later, Mogherini will have to disappoint someone”⁵².

3.3. Ways forward: smoother and more strategic

As various reform and rethinking processes will coincide, 2015 has been labelled the year of the Union’s ‘strategic reset’ (see Table 1). During these processes it will be important to recall and develop the lessons learnt during the first five years of post-Lisbon external action. The challenge will be to exploit fresh potential while keeping an eye on old and new, internal and external challenges. This section presents a number of policy recommendations for the short- and medium-term.

3.3.1. Foster more systematic coordination

The five years after Lisbon suggest there is no need for more, but rather for more systematic coordination. One of the areas where this would be needed is EU crisis management. In a 2013 Joint Communication, the HR/VP and the Commission called for a “more systematic use” of the Crisis Platform to facilitate coordination and “intelligent sequencing”⁵³. A British diplomat commented that “the EU needs more clarity on how the various crisis management instruments come together”⁵⁴. The HR/VP could enhance clarity by identifying the necessary links between temporary coordination processes within the Crisis Platform and the more sustained coordination within the Commission’s external action cluster. Meanwhile, the EEAS and Commission Secretaries General should ensure that the effects of this systematic coordination do not get stuck at the top of the hierarchy.

There should also be systematic coordination between the cabinets of Mogherini and Tusk regarding the division of labour in EU external action, in line with member state preferences. One option would be to leave the lead on Ukraine/Russia to the European Council President while the HR/VP focuses on a selected number of priorities in the neighbourhood, such as the escalating Libyan conflict, which an EU diplomat recently called “a semi-forgotten crisis.”⁵⁵

In her hearing, Mogherini underlined the need to use trade policy strategically as a foreign policy tool. This statement is somewhat simplifying considering that DG Trade has its own internal logic guided by commercial rather than purely political objectives. However, there are cases where the EU’s commercial leverage can be used politically or where trade deals have direct impact on the EU’s external relations. An example for the former is the ENP which promises better access to the Single Market in return for reforms. An example for the latter would be the impact of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership on relations with third countries such as Turkey or Russia.

50. Mogherini, „Hearing in the Foreign Affairs Committee”, *op. cit.*

51. See Niklas Helwig and Carolin Rüger, „Mogherini as EU High Representative: How can she redefine the role?”, Euractiv.com, 29 October 2014.

52. Interview with an EEAS official, 18 December 2014.

53. HR/VP and Commission, „The EU’s comprehensive approach”, *op. cit.*

54. Interview with a British diplomat, 28 November 2013.

55. AFP, „Terror attacks overshadow EU foreign ministers meeting”, *Asia One World*, 19 January 2015.

“THE KEY TASK FOR THE HR/VP WILL BE TO IDENTIFY RELEVANT THEMATIC INTERFACES THAT REQUIRE MORE SYSTEMATIC COOPERATION”

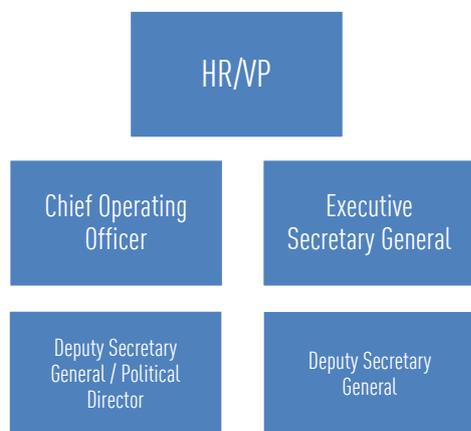
The key task for the HR/VP will be to identify relevant thematic interfaces that require more systematic cooperation or at least mutual information between various areas or instruments of external action. The identification of these interfaces could be improved if the HR/VP took over the Chairmanship of the Trade as well as Development formations of the Foreign Affairs Council, currently held by the rotating Presidency.

3.3.2. Streamline to prevent turf wars

The past five years have confirmed that competence overlaps and shared responsibility for financial resources increase the potential for inter- and intra-institutional tensions and turf wars. When reviewing the EEAS structures, the HR/VP should think carefully and on a case-by-case basis if de-confliction and a clear separation of competences should be preferred over an increased cooperation and, potentially, more turf wars.

The introduction of new coordination cells or positions also deserves careful consideration. A visible example of the potential negative implications was the disputed leadership of the EEAS Department for Crisis Response and Operational Coordination. An EEAS official noted that “there are currently too many bosses in the crisis management structures. This puts an important strain on resources. We need fewer chiefs and more Indians”⁵⁶. The dissolution of the Department for Crisis Response and Operational Coordination is currently discussed and, as it seems to have created more tensions than synergies, it should indeed be considered. In a similar vein, the rather bulky structure of the EEAS Corporate Board should be streamlined by merging the positions of the Executive Secretary General and the Chief Operating Officer into one Secretary General (*see Figure 2*).

FIGURE 2 ▶ Structure of EEAS Corporate Board



Source: [EEAS](#), December 2014.

Past discussions on the unclear positioning of the EU Special Representatives within the EEAS have shown that the member states are keen to hold on to the current setup⁵⁷. However, there might be a case for gradually shifting the EU Special Representatives’ portfolios away from geographic areas to reduce thematic overlaps with EEAS counter-parts. They could, for instance, be appointed temporarily for crisis situations or for more horizontal issues and challenges⁵⁸. A first example for a horizontal portfolio is the EU Special Representative for Human Rights appointed in 2012 (*see Table 6*).

56. Interview with an EEAS official, 18 December 2014.

57. Niklas Helwig, „The High Representative 3.0: Taking EU foreign policy to the next level“, *FIIA Briefing Paper 155*, 20 May 2014.

58. Interview, Landaburu, *op. cit.*

Finally, the financial procedures should be reviewed. The Commission should reassess the balance between upfront controls and ex-post auditing. Currently, there are too many upfront controls for the disbursement of operational funds. One option, already suggested by the 2013 EEAS Review, would be the extension of the fast-track procedure currently applicable in humanitarian assistance to preparatory and implementation measures in the realm of CFSP and CSDP. This option would also be in line with the views of the EP, which has to approve the annual CFSP budget. In December 2014, the Foreign Affairs Committee called on the Commission to present a proposal amending the relevant legislation accordingly⁵⁹.

3.3.3. Think *and* act more strategically

“ENSURE THE COMPREHENSIVENESS OF POLICY OPTIONS FROM THE OUTSET AND THUS MAKE THEM MORE ATTRACTIVE TO MEMBER STATES”

In her role as permanent Chair of the Foreign Affairs Council the HR/VP will certainly not be able to shape member state agreement on every single issue. However, she could start by encouraging more strategic and substantive debate on fewer items. The HR/VP and EEAS should fully exploit their potential as ‘brokers’ and distil member state consensus on a limited number of policy options prior to the meetings⁶⁰. The HR/VP could use her stronger Commission profile to ensure the comprehensiveness of policy options from the outset and thus make them more attractive to member states. To avoid unnecessary frictions, it might be better to circulate options papers to the member states in confidentiality, rather than leaking them to the press prior to consultation.

An instrument that should be consolidated and further developed in the short-term is the Union’s new planning instrument – the PFCA. According to an EEAS official, it still suffers from “teething problems”⁶¹. An example was the Ukrainian PCFA which was more an exercise of reverse engineering than of strategic and preventive planning. Nonetheless, the PFCA reflects the ambition to base EU crisis responses on a comprehensive political analysis and can thus be considered a “gentle revolution”.

In the medium-term, there might be room for a broader strategic overhaul⁶². However, some of the issues such as differences in national strategic cultures or the question of the added value of a new strategic document remain. Therefore, a stepwise process with meetings parallel to the Foreign Affairs Council meetings and without a predetermined output might be the most feasible option. This process should be structured around three steps:

1. The first would be the reassessment of the Union’s strategic environment by the HR/VP in cooperation with the Commission and following consultations with the member states, as foreseen by the European Council Conclusions of December 2013⁶³. The aim should not be to simply list threats, but rather to establish a collective order of priorities and interests.
2. The second step would be to (re-)define the Union’s approach to these challenges as well as to strategic partners or important global players. Future relations with Russia will certainly be a key issue in this regard.
3. In a third step, strategic rethinking should entail a needs-based discussion on capabilities and the EU’s yet unused instruments or Treaty provisions including, for instance, the Battlegroups; permanent structured cooperation in military capabilities⁶⁴; and the option of entrusting a group of willing and able member states with the implementation specific tasks or CSDP missions and operations⁶⁵.

59. European Parliament – Committee on Foreign Affairs, „Motion for a European Parliament resolution on the Annual Report from the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to the European Parliament”, 22 December 2014.

60. Helwig and Rüger, „In Search of a Role for the High Representative”, *op. cit.*

61. Interview with an EEAS official, 18 December 2014.

62. On the substantive dimensions of strategic rethinking, see also Jacques Delors et al., „Engaging Europe in the world”, *Tribune, Notre Europe* – Jacques Delors Institute, June 2014.

63. European Council, „Conclusions”, Brussels, 20 December 2013.

64. See Art. 46 TEU.

65. See Art. 44 TEU.

Once ideas are sufficiently ripe, they should be taken to the level of the European Council. A good opportunity to kick-start the debate would be the summit in June 2015. The eventual outcome of strategic rethinking should depend on substance. A new security strategy should not be an end in itself if it simply reiterates what has been said in the European Security Strategy of 2003 or its Implementation Report of 2008. If a document is eventually drafted, the timing of publication would require careful consideration. There would, for instance, be little sense in publishing it without having more clarity on Britain's European future or on the development of the Ukrainian conflict.

In this endeavour, political leaders in Brussels and national capitals should be aware of the past challenges and use their political weight to counter them in the future. If they fail to do so, the EU might struggle to rise up to the ever-growing complexity of its strategic environment. It will still take a longer process of political and intellectual maturation for the EU to produce a truly *common* foreign and security policy⁶⁶. This process will not be completed within the next five years, but there is quite some potential to make important steps forward.

⁶⁶. Interview with an EEAS official, 18 December 2014.

CONCLUSION

In late 2014, there was a tangible sense of optimism in Brussels and in national capitals that the new leaders and structures would remedy some important obstacles to the implementation of the comprehensive approach. The external relations cluster and the strengthened coordinating role of the HR/VP between EEAS and Commission reflect core lessons of the first five years of post-Lisbon EU external action. However, if these years have shown one thing, it is that institutional innovations or coordinating structures alone do not improve policy process, nor output. As an EEAS official put it, “Bureaucracies are bureaucracies – there is no electroshock therapy to change them (...). We have spent years talking about structures, now we should start talking to each other.”⁶⁷

“ IT WILL TAKE A LONG PROCESS OF POLITICAL AND INTELLECTUAL MATURATION TO PRODUCE EUROPEAN FOREIGN POLICY ”

In this endeavour, political leaders in Brussels and national capitals should be aware of the past challenges and use their political weight to counter them in the future. If they fail to do so, the EU might struggle to rise up to the ever-growing complexity of its strategic environment. It will still take a longer process of political and intellectual maturation for the EU to produce a truly common foreign and security policy⁶⁸. This process will not be completed within the next five years, but there is quite some potential to make important steps forward

⁶⁷. *Ibid.*

⁶⁸. Landaburu, interview, *op. cit.*

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