



EuroDipl Policy Brief

The added value of the European External Action Service (EEAS):

Network Power

This policy brief takes stock of the first ten years of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and challenges the often-unambitious interpretation of what value the EEAS can and should add to European diplomacy. It therefore develops alternative propositions of how the EEAS should define its mission and justify its existence from a network paradigm. On the one hand, the policy brief emphasizes the peculiarity and ability of the EEAS to do what other actors cannot, do not want to or are not particularly good at doing: connecting and creating networks. On the other hand, it puts forward the notion of “added value” as a future ambition for the EEAS to generate a kind of EU foreign policy that is more than the sum of its parts.

The EEAS should aim to become a diplomatic network hub that

- engages **diverging voices and ideas** from inside and outside the EU: from different policy fields, from EU institutions and EU member states, from friends and enemies
- **connects** traditional (state) and new (non-state) actors
- offers an **added value** that is **distinct** (from what member states or other institutions offer) at least and **emergent** at best.

To become this 21st century diplomatic network hub, the EEAS would need to focus on 3 qualities:

the EEAS should aim to be different, think differently, and act differently.



1. Introduction: why the EEAS needs re-inspiration now

Ten years into its existence the hype about the European External Action Service (EEAS) ended up in smoke: the EEAS found its mundane role in the everyday policy-making of the EU foreign policy machinery; it is appreciated by member states for its institutional memory and the expertise it provides via its diplomatic network; and internally staffing and human resourcing has been gradually professionalised. It's there, it does. But it does certainly not wow anymore.

But after its first 10 years, does the existence of the EEAS make the difference that it was meant to make? **Does the EEAS add the kind of value that provides a step change to the EU in terms of its international ambitions?** And if not, what course alterations or corrections would be needed to fundamentally revolutionise the kind of diplomacy the EU, its member states and its citizens should aim and ask for in the 21st century?

The 10th anniversary of the EEAS is a moment for celebration, but it also needs to be a moment for uncomfortable questions and for setting an ambitious bar for the next 10 years. It is an important moment for any entity, and a crucial moment for an EEAS that is still caught within competing expectations, uninformed misperceptions and institutional ambiguity. More profoundly though, it becomes **a highly salient - because existential - moment for an EEAS that struggles with its peculiar nature, its possible strengths and inherent weaknesses.**

Official celebration and think tank commentary unsurprisingly talk about the added value of the EEAS to the EU. Surprisingly, though - because devastatingly for the EEAS - questions on institutional competences (or the lack thereof), the difficult relationship with the Commission (still!) or the inadequacy of the EU to be a geopolitical power dominate the definition of "added value". Where is the ambition? Where is the ambition for an EEAS in relation to the kind of international influencer that the EU aims to be?

This policy brief advocates a return of the EEAS to its key strengths: instead of following the fashionable 20th century geopolitical power rhetoric (realist paradigm) or returning to inward-obsessed competence questions (institutional paradigm), **the EEAS should first and foremost pursue a relational paradigm.** In focusing on the power of relations and networks, it will find its distinct place within the EU institutional framework and excel as an indispensable diplomatic tool for 21st century European diplomacy.

This policy brief therefore explains why the EEAS should aim to become a diplomatic network hub and what such an ambition means for its future mission:

the EEAS should aim to be different, think differently, and act differently.



2. What kind of diplomatic added value is needed for the 21st century?

The world of 2021 is not the world of 2010, when the EEAS was set-up; or even the world of the early 2000s, when the idea of the service was first discussed during the Constitutional Convention. Since the mid-2000s, the European Union is said to have **struggled from crisis to crisis**: the sovereign debt crisis, the Ukraine crisis, the migration crisis, and now the Covid crisis. And this in a time when observers increasingly warn of the popular backlash against globalisation and the spreading of populism, nationalism and societal disenchantment with democracy.

Borrell's call for Europe to "relearn the language of power"ⁱ in early 2020 needs to be situated in this changing international context and the perceived increase of unpredictability. What is striking though is how quickly the **EU foreign policy discourse swung from one extreme to the other**: for the past decades EU pundits hailed the "force for good" character of EU international engagement and encouraged an active engagement into all kinds of societal aspects in third countries, what at close examination went beyond a traditional liberal paradigm of international cooperation. In the last two years, though, the rhetorical pendulum has swung back fast to the other extreme, where a dangerous and fundamental change in international power dynamics is said to threaten the EU's way of living, with "geopolitics", "interests" and "balance of power" mushrooming as key slogans outside of their natural IR theory habitat.

But can the EU at the same time be a geopolitical power and a liberal force for good in promoting multilateral cooperation? And can it succeed with such a grand strategy shift, without fundamentally overhauling its toolkit? The problem with the reinvention and rediscovery of a neorealist worldview is not that it is used, but that these fancy terms are thrown around without any deeper meaning. As empty verbiages they are not even close to a strategic vision that could inform the planning for a more effective EEAS; and if the new geopolitical EU strategy is indeed power politics in 20th century style, the EEAS would definitely not be the right tool.

Instead of focusing on polarizing extremes, **it is time for the EEAS to occupy the golden middle ground**: the balance between pursuing the EU's vision of what we want the world to look like in 2050 and the EU's realistic assessment of what the world is going to look like in 2050. Instead of further polarisation, the EU needs balance, and the **EEAS can help the EU in finding this balance by taking a network perspective**. Furthermore, instead of negating the crucial role of diplomacy for EU foreign policy, such a relational perspective empowers the EEAS and thus the EU to pursue its interests and vision while not forgetting what the EU can be particularly good at: connecting and building relations.



3. The EEAS as a diplomatic hub with a network way of thinking

Any assessment or future planning needs to **recognise the peculiarity of the EEAS**. The EEAS is not like any traditional foreign ministry, and it also should not be. Foreign policy and diplomacy are changing rapidly in their mode, function and role. Foreign ministries across Europe and beyond are losing governing power or at least need to increasingly share it with sectoral ministries and prime ministerial offices. At best they can carve out some coordination role for themselves, at worst they fall into the abyss of neglect. Why make the EEAS more like an old-fashioned foreign ministry, if it is exactly those who struggle to adapt to the needs of 21st century diplomacy? Hocking already in 2014 promoted an adjustment of our diplomacy understanding **from a hierarchical to a network mode**. The emphasis is on communication and trust instead of controlling interactions between the Domestic and the International; on non-hierarchical and dynamic relations between a multitude of public and private actors.

To add relations in addition to hierarchies in international politics and European diplomacy does not mean to negate the necessity or salience of high politics, but to see high politics as the tip of the iceberg that rests and often relies on a plethora of transnational, relational dynamics that are out of sight under the water surface. **The intention is not to replace but to add**, and to more skilfully assess when and how these two modes of diplomacy can best reinforce each other and add value to foreign policy ambitions. Instead, **the EU needs a confident EEAS that appreciates both: the power and the networks**. And the EU needs a confident EEAS that understands that in the 21st century you cannot have the one without the other.

The EEAS would add value in two ways. First, in a more traditional understanding, the **EEAS would add value by complementing and enriching** what national diplomatic services (can) do. It is not meant to repeat or replace the activities of foreign services of EU member states, who struggle to adapt to new demands and realities, with their centuries of traditions and their established ways of doing things. But secondly and more profoundly, it is exactly due to the peculiarity of EU foreign policy making system (where the EEAS works in addition to the foreign services of the member states) and the ingrained notion of emergence in relational thinking (where the output is more than the sum of its constituent parts) that **the EEAS can add value through a network approach**. The notion of “the added value” as an emergent network property means that the EEAS through its hub function is able to generate a kind of EU foreign policy-making that is more than the sum of what member states and institutions do separately. It is not about aggregation but about enabling the EU foreign policy-making system to go beyond the sum of individual contributions.

The **EEAS** therefore needs to become a **network hub** that

- engages **diverging voices and ideas** from inside and outside the EU: from different policy fields, from EU institutions and EU member states, from friends and enemies
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Proposition 1: An EEAS that aims to *be* different

In the last 10 years the EEAS developed its distinct identity between a bureaucratic polity and a diplomatic service, although in assessments it is still foreign ministries or the European Commission that are used as level of comparison. This is counter-productive. Instead, we should think harder about what kind of diplomacy a post-modern actor like the EU is going to need in 30, 50, 100 years. Because form follows function. The EEAS can only be the diplomatic hub that adds value, if it has an opportune form – a suitable identity, a suitable structure and suitable staffing.

Recommendations for the EEAS

- **Brand yourself as being different** (*a suitable identity 1*)

Understand and explain that in order to add value to European diplomacy – in a complementary or emergent manner – you need to be different.

- **Be the advocate for a future-orientated and consensual European foreign policy perspective** (*a suitable identity 2*)

Engage member states, experts (and not just the close think tank community), citizens and third country parties in discussing approaches, perceptions, expectations. Nudge national elites from states to explain why they decide the way they do.

- **Revamp the EEAS structure towards an open, challenging, thought-provoking and attentive environment that encourages experimentation and dialogue beyond comfort zones** (*a suitable structure*)

An EEAS with minimal hierarchical structures, where ideas count more than ranks. This is not how diplomatic services are built, and it is also not how member states foreign services think. But this is the only way that the EEAS can complement and add value. (Do not aim to be the better Commission DG).

- **Celebrate diversity of long-term and short-term staff** (*suitable staffing*)

Create flexible formats of long-standing career opportunities mixed with shorter secondments/employments for specialists with non-diplomatic backgrounds from various institutions, a multitude of backgrounds, from member states and non-EU states.

Proposition 2: An EEAS that aims to *think* differently

The EEAS needs to think in “power with” instead of “power over” terms. Thinking in relational instead of hierarchical terms fosters the complementary added value that the EEAS can bring to the more traditional way of thinking that foreign ministries are used to. But it also enables the EEAS to bring emergent added value that would otherwise not be possible. Such a perspective is also much more in line with the long-standing liberal identity of the EU, where cooperation is key and where win-win scenarios are prioritised over zero-sum games.

Recommendations for the EEAS



- **Be a network hub not just a coordination platform: listen and have something to say**

The EEAS should engage, listen, synthesize, add, connect and engage some more. It is, however, not just about coordinating and bringing voices together in a room, but about supporting their dialogue, synthesizing, and drawing conclusions. As part of this process, develop your voice as *the* European foreign policy hub: have something to say.

- **The EEAS as network hub in an all-connected and complex world**

The EEAS should embrace the thinking that in the 21st century foreign policy is not above other policy domains, but that foreign policy thinking is about recognising the interdependencies and linkages between policy areas and about bringing strategic political thinking into these connections. EU-internally, the strong interplay with the sectoral expertise from the Commission DGs needs to be valued as a strength, not a weakness for EU foreign policy-making. EU-externally, the EEAS needs to think realistically, but not realist. A post-modern EU foreign policy is in its ambition not interest- or norm-free but puts co-option above coercion.

Proposition 3: An EEAS that aims to *act* differently

The EU does not need a 28th foreign ministry and a 28th diplomatic network. The EEAS is a peculiar and distinct diplomatic entity, but instead of this being its weakness, it should be its strength. Because function can also follow form.

Recommendations

- **Go beyond standard operating procedures. Generate open and inclusive debates in Brussels, in capitals and in third countries**

The EEAS should become a “factory of foreign policy ideas”, suggested Pierre Vimontⁱⁱ. But such ideas only emerge, if one listens carefully to those voices that are different or disagree; if everyone is encouraged to think outside the box; and if staff dares to go beyond the EEAS comfort zone. Inside the EU the EEAS should engage even more those member states or political elites that seem to disagree; outside the EU it should engage those actors that traditional diplomatic services do not dare to/want to engage with.

Furthermore, foreign ministries increasingly engage in public diplomacy in third countries but also nurture public debates at home: the EEAS with its multi-national staff is in an excellent position to do exactly that: to promote debates and exchanges about European diplomacy inside and outside EU borders. This implies also that the EEAS does not only see the institutions as its main stakeholders, but also national political elites and EU citizens.

- **Being a network hub means you matter because you connect and enable**

To fully embrace the notion of a network hub the EEAS needs to understand that enabling and connecting other actors or institutions has as much – if not even more value – than doing something yourself. It is not about who holds the competence on a certain issue, but if the EU as a whole managed to even better address a certain issue due to the contribution of the EEAS.



- **An EEAS that is, thinks and acts differently, also needs to be assessed differently**

The EEAS in becoming a network hub will need different resources and processes. And it will need room for experimentation and adjustment. And most importantly, the EU through its member states, think-tankers, researchers and citizens will need to find a more suitable way of assessing the added value of the EEAS.

4. Concluding Remarks

Ten years after the creation of the EEAS its existence and peculiarity should be celebrated, but it is also a salient moment to re-think and re-imagine more rigorously the kind of “added value” this service can and should provide for European diplomacy and EU foreign policy cooperation.

The EU global strategy reads that “*for Europe, soft and hard power go hand in hand*” and the EEAS is an indispensable part of the EU foreign policy machinery to reach this right balance. Yet, for the EEAS to complement and enable the best possible EU foreign policy-making, it needs a paradigm shift: it needs to let go of geopolitical power rhetoric (realist paradigm) or inward-obsessed competence questions (institutional paradigm). Instead, the EEAS should first and foremost pursue a relational paradigm. But in order to embrace such a network perspective, the EEAS needs to be different, think differently and act differently.

Anne-Marie Slaughter, an US political scientist and 2009-2011 Director of Policy Planning for the U.S. State Department under U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton suggested in 2017 that “*we must learn to see in stereo. (...) We must learn to see all global events in terms of both the chessboard and the web. (...) each captures an important part of international reality. (...) we must learn to integrate both perspectives in our vision, seeing states and people, nations and networks at the same time*” (Slaughter 2017, 25). EU member states are chessboard-trained, but on their own they struggle to see and appreciate the necessity of the webs. Therefore, it needs a confident EEAS that is able to deliver both: the networks - and through them - the power.

ⁱ Borrell, Josep. 2020. Embracing Europe’s Power. Accessible via <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/embracing-europe-s-power-by-josep-borrell-2020-02>

ⁱⁱ In the CEPS/FES/SIEPS policy brief of the taskforce EEAS 2.0 under the chairmanship of Pierre Vimont recommended for the EEAS to achieve “*more flexibility to think, propose and act, more agility to factor in a rapidly changing international landscape, and more determination to put the Union in a leading role*”: https://www.ceps.eu/download/publication/?id=32013&pdf=TFR_EEAS-2_0-From-self-doubt-to-self-assurance.pdf