

THE RESEARCHER COLUMN

European Foreign Policy: Beyond National Diplomacy?

Based on current research Rebecca Adler-Nissen addresses the controversial nature of the EU's External Action Service and argues for the importance of the symbolic struggles involved in the establishment of this new diplomatic body and the effects on the future of European and national diplomacy and sovereignty.

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The rise of non-state actors on the global scene appears to transform diplomacy. These new actors, ranging from transnational companies to global media, over non-governmental organisations to multilateral organisations, challenge the image of national diplomats as 'custodians of the idea of international society'. Also domestically, national foreign services (in most Western countries) are under pressure from other ministries and a greater concentration of foreign policy activities around prime ministers and presidents, thereby side-lining the foreign ministries themselves. Symbolically, new articulations of collective representation such as the 'No Logo' movement, the Seattle demonstrations, and various attempts to create a cosmopolitan public sphere challenge territorial-based diplomacy.

In my current research I examine what has been called the greatest rival to national diplomacy in Europe to date: a diplomatic service of the European Union. The creation of a High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy and an External Action Service (EEAS), as it is officially called, remains one of the Treaty of Lisbon's most divisive inventions. Since 1 December 2010, the EEAS has been given the task to serve the EU's common foreign policy, represent the EU around the world, and develop common strategies on everything from EU peacekeeping missions to development aid and possibly consular affairs for EU citizens abroad. The EEAS will only have about 3,700 diplomats and is thus comparable in size to the foreign service of a medium-sized member state. Yet the creation of a fully integrated European foreign service has been met with great anxieties by observers in the EU member states, fearing that it will eventually replace national diplomacy. Former head of the UK Diplomatic Service Sir Anthony Acland sees the EEAS as an 'enormous transfer of national sovereignty'. However, decisions on EU foreign policy are still taken unanimously, and Europe remains divided over important foreign policy issues. Why is the EEAS so controversial?

Studies of diplomacy and EU foreign policy have tended to focus on institutional or material changes and have ignored or downplayed the symbolic changes that are also in progress. IR realists have regarded the EU's foreign policy as 'naïve' or even 'tragic' due to the EU's lack of military capabilities. Constructivists have seen the

EU as representing a 'normative power', but fail to address the crucial relationship between the EU and national foreign services. While institutionalists see the EEAS as finally providing the EU with the single telephone number that Henry Kissinger (mythically) asked for in the 1970s, critics would point to the continuation of institutional turf-wars. These perspectives differ in their fundamental assumptions about what drives international politics and more specifically about the nature of the EEAS, but they are all based on the assumption that material or institutional resources are decisive for international politics. Few scholars discuss the symbolic struggles involved in the establishment of this new diplomatic body and their effects on the future of European and national diplomacy and sovereignty.

My research shows that the institutional and material dimensions of the EU's new diplomatic service have been vastly exaggerated by its critics. Why is the EEAS then met with such anxiety? The positive thesis is an answer to this question. I argue that, just as the institutional and material dimensions have been exaggerated, both critics and supporters have underestimated the symbolic struggles over the EEAS, which concern the role of the state in diplomacy. This argument builds on a Bourdieu-inspired framework conceptualising a diplomatic field where different state- and non-state actors struggle for dominant positions. The framework is used to analyse, first, the constitutional struggle to establish new diplomatic body, the struggle to define the 'genuine' diplomat and disputes over the appointment of Heads of Delegations and whether the EEAS should take over consular affairs. The analysis demonstrates that the EEAS is not just innovating or supplementing (as other new diplomatic actors) but potentially subversive. The EEAS questions the state as 'a central bank for symbolic credit'. This explains its controversial nature and the counter-strategies adopted by national foreign services and domestic constituencies to delegitimise the EEAS. The struggles to define the 'genuine' diplomat reveal a rupture in the European diplomatic field, pointing towards the emergence of a hybrid form of diplomacy.

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