CIDOB'S Conversations with ...

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PIERRE VIMONT
Secretary-General of the European External Action Service

The Discreet Charm of European Diplomacy

Francesc Badia & Oleguer Sarsanedas, CIDOB

A man of good will, tall, broad and elegant, with a very welcoming smile and a soft tone of voice that makes you immediately feel *à l'aise*, Pierre Vimont is also a hard worker. He well must be. As *Ambassadeur de France*, a dignity bestowed (for life) to only a few French career diplomats, Pierre Vimont has served at the London, Brussels and Washington embassies and has held several relevant European Union posts. In 2010, he was appointed by the EU's High Representative, Catherine Ashton, to be the first Executive Secretary-General of the European External Action Service (EEAS), which began operation on 1st December of the same year. We are talking European diplomacy here and, if the head of the newly established foreign service was a British Lady, his right hand should well be a French *Gentillhomme*, wasn't it?

Established following the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, the EEAS serves as a foreign ministry and diplomatic corps for the EU, implementing the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy and assuming some of the EU's external representation. Under the authority of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (a post also created by the Treaty of Lisbon), whom it assists, the EEAS is supposed to manage the EU's response to crises, have intelligence capabilities and cooperate with the Commission. Not a easy task at all. As an example, the High Representative and the EEAS can propose and implement policy, but decision-making is left to the Foreign Affairs Council --which only the High Representative chairs. Too much power in her hands? Not quite.

Gone are the days of Mr. Europe, as charismatic and hyperactive High Representative Javier Solana was known, when the Common Foreign and Security Policy was the organised, agreed foreign policy of the European Union for security and defence diplomacy, only dealt with a specific part of the EU's external relations, namely trade and commercial policy and funding to third countries, with very scarce means and a minuscule budget, if any. Post-CFSP European foreign policy, Pierre Vimont argues, is like Europe itself, a work in progress, a process, not a

product: it began in Lisbon and it will take some time to grow and evolve. "This is what happens with Europe all the time", he comments, "It is complex, it takes long, but eventually it gets there."

There are three main differences between the situation today and the one prior to 2009. First, the EEAS works in cooperation with the diplomatic services of the EU member states and includes officials from the relevant departments of the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union and of the European Commission, as well as staff co-opted from –or rather appointed by– the diplomatic services of the member states (about one third of the total). With a network of 141 delegations deployed around the world, today the EU has (or, rather, is beginning to have) a common diplomatic service. "It takes time", Vimont insists, "some years, probably. But we are moving in the right direction."

How does this work in practice? Member states try to get as many national diplomats in as possible, of course, and competition is fierce. The EEAS, consequently, can select the very best from different diplomatic traditions, aim for specialization in given areas, and look for specific capabilities. "But we have to proceed step by step, not to frighten the national diplomacies. They are always saying that we should have asked them, informed them previously, etc. But interaction between EEAS headquarters and the delegations goes on all the time."

The second major difference with the Solana days is that today a EU common foreign policy, complementary to that of the member states, is up and running –surprisingly so, since many had predicted severe, even insurmountable difficulties. In the last two years, the EEAS has established very good relations with world regional bodies, especially in Africa, and improved cooperation. Even when some countries (Libya, for example) were experiencing difficulties with some member states, the EEAS team has managed to maintain a confidence-based relationship with them –which is, Vimont stresses, "particularly useful now."

The third difference is that the EU has now been on the lead in several regions of the world –in the Corn of Africa, for instance: training troops, policing pirates, carrying out tailor-made measures. "Here and there, you can see achievements."

Vimont acknowledges "a lot of criticism" on Mali, though, for Europe was nowhere to be seen. Or was it? Some mechanisms informing the decision making process were in place, tested, and "it worked fine": the French informed the EU High Representative prior to the military intervention, something unheard of in history. Minister of Foreign and European Affairs Laurent Fabius briefed Catherine Ashton, and asked for help in several areas: to accelerate the EU training mission in place, to finance the African force, to act as clearing house for contributions, to provide humanitarian and diplomatic assistance, and to help define a political road map for Mali. France also asked for additional support from other EU member states. "This was done in a record time", Vimont explains, "and it was very well done. The EU did not send boots on the ground, but this is not what it was supposed to do." To him, Mali has been (so far) a success story for an External Service still in its infancy: "We had never managed to combine so closely the humanitarian, the political and the military." The same cannot be said of Libya two years ago, "where everybody was to blame" –although, hopefully, we may be learning from experience.

Vimont thinks that the right metaphor for European foreign policy today is a glass half-full/half-empty. Third countries such as the US, India, China, Brazil, understand EU foreign policy far better than EU member states themselves. "We thought that the EU delegations would be difficult to pull off, but it worked out very well. In Washington DC, there were 27 diplomatic member-state legations, now they are all coordinated. At the end of the day, this has become a rather good idea."

Do we need new tools to deal with the new global architecture? Vimont acknowledges that it is here where the contribution of the EU diplomacy finds most difficulties. A strategic vision needs time and experience to build –and EU diplomacy is only beginning. However, "This is definitely an area in which we must work", he states. "You need experience and a correct assessment of what is going on in local challenges (such as in Mali, and Libya). It is not easy. Again, it takes time."

All in all, after our conversation with ambassador Vimont, we are left with a mixed feeling, a strange combination of prudence and determination. When it comes to diplomacy, isn't that the name of the game? After all, diplomacy in Europe is a very old métier, and if only we were asked to take into consideration what was happening among European chancelleries a few decades ago, we would have to concede that what we are witnessing today is not a half full/half empty glass scenario, but rather a miracle.