

British Embassy

**29 Merrion Road
Dublin 4
Ireland**

Telephone: +353 (1) 205-3700

Facsimile: +353 (1) 205-3719

Balance of Competence Foreign Policy Report: Record of Irish Think Tank Round Table – 27 February 2013

1. The British Embassy in Dublin hosted a roundtable discussion for the Balance of Competences Foreign Policy report on 27 February 2013. The session was attended by nine think tank representatives from a range of backgrounds including academia, senior government service and diplomacy, and politics.
2. This summary record, in agreement with participants, is under the Chatham House rule, i.e. remarks are not attributed by name to those present. It is not an exhaustive record but draws out the key points made which relate to the balance of competences between the EU and the UK and the impact on UK national interest. The structure of the session was light touch and conducted as an open, round table discussion on the Balance of Competences Foreign Policy Report and the current state of EU External Action and foreign policy, but also touched on the UK's future in Europe.

Summary of Conclusions

- The collective weight of the 27 acting together, particularly in areas of soft power, cannot be matched by the UK acting on its own.
- The EU is not as effective in the area of hard power, and the UK and France could do more together to strengthen the EUs capability.
- A lack of coherence across member states and between institutions limits the effect of the EU to deliver a common foreign policy.
- The effectiveness of the EEAS is difficult to judge so early in its institutional life, but the forthcoming review presents an opportunity to look at key institutional and operational issues which currently limit its effectiveness.

Comments from Participants

Value Added of working through the EU

1. There was a strong consensus among participants that a UK exit from the EU would leave the UK worse off, the EU worse off and have a negative impact globally. Participants felt the collective weight of the 27 member states enabled the EU to add real value in areas of soft power. Several participants cited the EU's positive role as an "initiator" in negotiations on climate change and nuclear non-proliferation as an example of the added value of the UK working through the EU to effect global influence. All participants agreed that in a globalised world increasingly dominated by major power blocks, the UK interest would remain in working from within to strengthen the EU's capabilities.
2. Several participants highlighted the economic benefits of UK membership of the EU. All agreed that the weight of the 27 acting together in trade negotiations could not be matched by the UK acting alone – several participants pointed to the importance of the forthcoming EU-US trade negotiations and the important role the UK had as the pivot between the EU and the US.
3. Access to the Single Market was a benefit Ireland and the UK agreed on. Where the single market was complete it added enormous value to national economies. What was needed now was more, not less market integration. One participant noted the response to the ongoing horse meat crisis as an example of effective coordination between EU member states and across institutions on an issue that cut across competences – proving that where the political will existed coherence was relatively simple.

EU Weakness on Conflict and Security

4. Several participants contrasted the influence and effect of the EU as a global soft power, with its relative weakness on conflict, security and the exercise of hard power. Participants acknowledged that this was an area where it was difficult to achieve genuine coherence – some cited German reluctance to intervene in Africa, others some member states' neutrality. But, others felt the UK and France could do more to strengthen the EU's collective hard power capability, and had underplayed their hand at the EU level. Interventions in Libya and Mali demonstrated the potential of defence cooperation within the EU, but also illustrated how far the EU was from coherent response at the level of the 27.

5. Participants agreed on the growing importance of a more coherent EU defence and security policy. In terms of future challenges, some participants pointed to the growing threat in North Africa. There was consensus that a broader approach would be needed to head off potential future conflicts and threats in the near neighbourhood – particularly as the US hard power influence in the region receded. One participant highlighted the need for the EU to decide what its future relationship with NATO would look like.

The Limits of a Common Foreign Policy

6. There was broad agreement on the huge potential benefit of an effective EU common foreign policy. But there was also acknowledgement that agreement on CFP issues at the level of the 27 was difficult. Some participants felt the fact that CFP remained an area of mixed competence added to the lack of coherence. Others felt that there was a lack of genuine political will or support for CFP among member states. Participants agreed that this lack of coherence, and not the institutions or instruments was the main obstacle in implementing effective CFP.
7. Some participants highlighted the deleterious effect the ongoing economic crisis had on the EU's ability to make progress on CFP issues. The political focus was on the economy, and CFP rarely figured at Council. Others underlined the need for foreign policy issues to gain traction at a higher level within EU. In addition, some participants felt ongoing political tensions – for example between net recipient and payeur nations – hampered progress towards coherence in areas such as CFP.

Effectiveness of the EEAS

8. In general participants agreed that the external action project held huge and largely untested potential – several participants highlighted the fact that the external action service had no effective global precedent. The area of 3rd country partnerships was highlighted as an area where the EU/EAS could add value to the UK (and vice versa) in the key areas of national interest such as human rights, rule of law, democracy eg. in China. But there was broad acknowledgement that the EAs were not yet pulling its weight on policy development, nor did it have adequate strategic focus to add real value in these key areas.

9. While few disagreed with the analysis that the EEAS was not yet fully effective, there was consensus that it was a young institution experiencing understandable teething troubles. That said, themes had begun to emerge that participants hoped the forthcoming review would address. Some participants felt the EAS relationship with the other institutions needed to be re-examined. Others highlighted the fact that the double hatted nature of the High Representative role was a critical limiting factor. One participant described it as an “impossible job”, but suggested Member States had got exactly what they wanted in terms of the role’s influence and effect. There was general consensus that progress needed to be made in simplifying the EEAS bureaucracy and administrative processes. One participant said the UK could do more to inject a degree of “anglo-saxon pragmatism” into an institution that was not working effectively enough.

British Embassy, Dublin

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