

Britain and the European Union: Review of Balance of Competences

Foreign Policy

Evidence of Graham Avery

I wish to comment on two questions:

- In what areas of foreign policy does the EU offer added value for Britain?
- How can the EU's delivery mechanisms be made more effective?

This contribution represents my personal point of view, drawing on my experience of service with the British government in London and with the European Commission in Brussels (see biographical note in annex).

Two preliminary remarks:

- In foreign policy the question of 'competences' poses itself differently than in other areas where EU policy is made through legal acts such as regulations or directives. Only in the case of trade does the EU have an exclusive competence; in other areas, national foreign policies and European policies effectively co-exist side by side. Consequently the concept of 'value-added' provides a more useful framework for analysis than 'competence'.
- Although the United Kingdom has a population of 60 million, a large economy, and well-armed forces, we are not a big country. To project our interest and values, we must work with others. This is especially true for transnational problems such as terrorism, energy supply, or climate change. The EU is composed of partners whose geographical situation and political, economic and social conditions are mostly similar to ours: with them, the development of 'common policies' is a viable concept.

What added-value does the EU offer for British foreign policy?

In the field of defence and security the EU has yielded limited value-added so far for the UK. The EU's capacity to exercise 'soft power' is more developed than its capacity for 'hard power'. But the intelligent use of 'soft power' can prevent the need for military action, and the EU is well equipped with instruments and policies designed for state-building, reconciliation, and conflict prevention (cf. the EU's action in the Western Balkans). These resources and capabilities are far greater than the UK could deploy on its own.

It is difficult to identify any region of the world where the EU is not potentially useful to Britain, to a greater or lesser degree. In some cases, in regions where European interests are limited, the potential is small. But in other cases the potential is great, particularly in other European countries and neighbouring regions: Eastern Europe (e.g. Ukraine) and Russia, North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East (e.g. Iran, Syria). In many of these areas the EU's enlargement policy and neighbourhood policy offer financial and economic resources, instruments of cooperation, and levers of political influence that could not be matched by the UK acting alone.

To approach the question in another way, it is difficult also to identify cases where the UK has been significantly hampered in pursuing its foreign policy aims as a result of EU membership or the EU's foreign policy.

How can the EU's delivery mechanisms (specifically, the European External Action Service) be made more effective?

The Lisbon Treaty created the European External Action Service (EEAS) as the main delivery mechanism for European foreign policy: it aims to provide a more coherent, visible and effective way of conducting foreign policy both in Brussels and outside the EU. It had a difficult birth, and is still in a formative stage, but already it has had some success:

- When Chris Patten was in charge of the 'first pillar' (external economic policy) in the Commission, he was frustrated by its artificial separation from the 'second pillar' (foreign policy) managed in the Council by Javier Solana. Now they are both managed under one roof in Brussels, under the responsibility of Catherine Ashton.
- Meetings of the EU Council of Ministers are better prepared, and the sharing of information between Brussels and national foreign Ministries has improved.
- The network of EU Delegations in non-member countries is working well: their role in representing common policies (replacing the rotating six-monthly Presidency) has simplified the EU's relations with other countries, without detracting from the role of national embassies.

For the future, the EEAS has much potential for Britain:

- Within the EU, and elsewhere, Britain has a reputation for the effectiveness of its diplomacy, and the quality of the Ministers and diplomats who represent it. Foreign policy is an area where many other EU members want and expect a strong contribution from us. We are well placed to shape ideas and initiatives in a way that coincides with our long-term interests. European foreign policy is a field where we can obtain more added-value for the UK by adding value through the EEAS.
- The EU can act in foreign affairs only where all its members feel they have a common interest. To develop European foreign policy in a better way the EEAS needs to understand better what are the national priorities and interests. Identifying what is a common European interest is even more complicated than defining national interest. The EEAS needs to devote more resources to strategic planning and analysing with member states where and what their interests are, in order to identify where and how the EU has common interests. This work must be done upstream of decisions: if it is left until the last moment, when the crisis comes, it is too late.
- The EEAS is a structure in which national diplomats and officials of EU institutions work side by side. It offers the chance for European policy-making to be enriched by national experience, and national policy-making by European experience. When British diplomats are working in the EEAS, either in Brussels or in EU Delegations, they can contribute ideas, approaches and methods drawn from their national experience and background. When they return to their service of origin, they will be

better equipped by experience to know how to make use of the EU's foreign policy to pursue British national interests.

One final remark:

- When the common agricultural policy was invented in the 1960s, France was successful in ensuring that European policy reflected its interests. Our country, with its history, its experience, and its resources, is well equipped to guide and influence the development of European foreign policy. If the French could do it for agriculture, the British can surely be smart enough to do it for foreign policy.

Annex

Graham Avery is Senior Member of St. Antony's College, Oxford University, Senior Adviser at the European Policy Centre, Brussels, and Honorary Director-General of the European Commission.

In Whitehall in 1965-72 he was a member of the team negotiating British membership of the European Communities, and was later Private Secretary to British Ministers of Agriculture. In Brussels in the European Commission (1973-2006) he worked in agricultural policy, foreign affairs, enlargement policy, and the cabinets of the President and other Commissioners. His last post was as Director for Strategy, Coordination and Analysis in the Directorate General for External Relations.

In 2012 he was made Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George for services to European affairs.