

Nov 04, 2016 by [Mai'a K. Davis Cross](#)

## The European External Action Service and Smart Power <sup>[1]</sup>

On 1 December 2010, the European Union (EU) inconspicuously launched the new European External Action Service (EEAS). Much of the world was unaware that anything had changed. But despite its quiet beginnings, the EEAS is actually a major innovation in the field of diplomacy as the first supranational diplomatic service of its kind. To be sure, it was not created from scratch. It builds upon the infrastructure of the 136 Commission delegations around the world that were already in place. But the powers of the new EU delegations are significantly broader and more ambitious than the old Commission delegations. Rather than being responsible for enacting the policies of just one institution, the EEAS is charged with coordinating, shaping, and enacting the entire body of EU foreign policy, under the command of the EU's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton. In this sense, rather than being an offshoot of just one EU institution, the EEAS is set to become the embodiment of common EU foreign policy, and is in the process of cultivating a distinctive institutional identity.

Of all the Lisbon Treaty's innovations, the EEAS most demonstrates the EU's commitment to smart power. I define smart power as the strategic and simultaneous use of both hard and soft power. The EEAS is still in its first year and it is too soon to know what role it will ultimately have, but its very existence is an important indication of the EU's evolving approach to foreign policy. From the 2003 Iraq war to the current Libya crisis, it is easy to point out the recent, high-profile episodes in which member states were not readily able to coordinate their foreign policies, but it would be a mistake to draw any conclusions from these events alone. As discussed below, from a longer-term perspective, the fact that Europeans were willing to launch an ambitious, new multinational diplomatic institution shows that they are taking smart power seriously. This bodes well for the EU's ability to be better prepared in the face of crises, and to become a more consistent foreign policy actor.

What is smart power and how does the EEAS contribute to it? Joseph Nye has written extensively about different forms of power. He defines hard power as coercive. It is the ability of A to force B do something it would not otherwise do. By contrast, soft power inspires attraction, the ability to make B want what A wants. In order to recognize smart power, it is important to note that the tools of power do not necessarily correlate with either hard or soft power specifically. That is, it would be wrong to assume that hard power is equated with military might and soft power with diplomacy. Rather, military, diplomatic, economic, and cultural tools can all be used either to coerce or to attract. For example, militaries used for humanitarian aid and disaster relief can be a source of attractive power, as can militaries that are efficient and well-run. Similarly, diplomacy can be coercive, using the tools of sanctions, hard bargaining, or shaming. But diplomacy is also the key instrument of engagement, persuasion, and mutual understanding. Thus, a variety of different tools could be at work in

crafting the strategic combination of hard and soft power.

The launch of the EEAS reflects a European commitment to smart power in a number of ways. First, the EEAS is designed to bind the foreign policies of member states and EU institutions more closely together, facilitating better coordination of hard and soft power. This is of course key to achieving effective smart power. Member states have been the main purveyors of hard power, while the EU has been more of a source of soft power. This is true both in response to unanticipated crises as well as in terms of policy emphases. The EU has been reluctant to coerce (or to appear to coerce) because it is a multinational actor that is committed to institutional and legal processes that are transparent and voluntary. Hard power tactics would go against its normative character. Indeed, the EU resorts to hard power only to support its most important norms and values, such as to stop human rights violations or discourage authoritarian practices. Typically, the EU draws upon its wealth of soft power. Depending on the audience, the EU is attractive because of its democratic norms, model of regional integration, commitment to enlarging its membership, history of overcoming a violent past, and so on.

By contrast, member states have tended to control the hard power side of foreign policy, to the extent that this is necessary, because it is much easier for them to act decisively and legitimately in ways that involve coercion. When it comes down to it, statesmen still have the distinct authority to make difficult foreign policy decisions unilaterally and to implement them as quickly as they deem necessary. Of course, member states also have a wealth of soft power resources at the same time, such as programs of educational exchange, cultural promotion, and public diplomacy. The creation of the EEAS shows the political will to bring these various tools of power together, and to set the stage for better coordination of both hard and soft foreign policy strategies.

Second, the creation of the EEAS is “smart” because the EU is fundamentally a diplomatic actor. This is where its real strength lies. The primary way in which member states and EU institutions articulate their interests in the international arena is through diplomacy. The common market, Schengen zone, justice and home affairs issues, enlargement, and so on, were all built on a strong process of internal diplomacy among member states. High-level, professional diplomats based in Brussels push integration forward and translate new treaties into tangible policy. By strengthening this hallmark of Europe – diplomacy – the EU capitalizes on what it does best. Without exception, member states have put forward their best and most qualified ambassadors to lead the new EU delegations, and at lower levels in the diplomatic hierarchy competition for EEAS postings has been fierce. Given that the success of the EU delegations will rest in part on the people who populate them, there is reason to believe that all parties involved want to equip the EEAS to be a smart power actor. Diplomats are well-positioned and professionally trained to use soft power consistently, and hard power when necessary. By focusing on diplomacy as the tool for future EU foreign policy, and then endowing the new institution with the best and the brightest, Europeans have clearly shown a commitment to smart power.

Third, the EEAS enables the member states to articulate their common voice more strongly. In doing so, it amplifies both hard and soft power. Indeed, the oft-repeated goal of member states to speak with one voice comes from an understanding that by acting together, Europe is stronger. Collectively, the 27 member states have much at their disposal – over half a billion people, the largest economy in the world, the second-highest level of military spending

globally, the largest contribution of foreign aid, transnational collaboration in research and development, and so on. For several decades now, member states have renewed and strengthened their goal to speak with one voice in foreign policy matters: from the 1970 European Political Cooperation to the 1992 Common Foreign and Security Policy to the 1998 European Security and Defense Policy. Now in 2011, with the EEAS, Europeans have one of the largest diplomatic services in the world. This new diplomatic body is distinctive in that it actually puts thousands of high-level foreign policy experts on the ground who will be able to judge first-hand how events impact EU interests and goals. They will also be able to shape responses to these events, and to build strong relationships that they can draw upon when unexpected crises strike in the future. This will serve to make both Europe's hard and soft power more visible.

In sum, the EEAS facilitates better coordination of hard and soft power, capitalizes on a successful tradition of professional diplomacy, and amplifies hard and soft power. The potential for effective smart power clearly exists. Of course, it is still up to the member states to decide what they will allow the EEAS to do, and how far it will go in its development. Ashton has already faced the challenge of coordinating diverse member-state positions in the wake of several crises. The EEAS is ideally suited to exercise smart power, but it must still have a mandate to act. Stronger leadership going forward is necessary so that member states are encouraged to see their diplomatic creation reach its potential.

Naturally, the EEAS does not mean that member states will be able to speak with one voice all the time, but there are reasons to be optimistic. The EU's development of its own internal diplomacy has shown that professional diplomats often find ways of proving their abilities on the job. The Committee of Permanent Representatives (Coreper), comprised of member states' ambassadors to the EU, is an excellent example of this. Coreper started out with a limited mandate to prepare Council meetings. By many accounts, it has now grown into the central engine of EU integration. This occurred in large part because of the initiative of these highly experienced ambassadors. Could the EEAS also achieve this kind of authority and influence on the global stage? This may be a more challenging proposition, but as already noted, it is off to a good start. Moreover, the fact that European leaders launched this new entity in the first place shows a commitment to smart power. These leaders now have a stake in the outcome, and the right ingredients are in place for success.

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*Dr. Mai'a K. Davis Cross will have a full-length and more comprehensive article on the question of European smart power titled, "Europe, A Smart Power?" to be published later this year in International Politics, Volume 48, Issue 6.*

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