Guest Editorial

Serving the Union Foreign and Security Policy

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My five years as High Representative of the European Union for Foreign and Security policy and Vice President of the European Commission have been extremely intense and rich of many different experiences: from negotiations on the Iran nuclear deal to the launch of the EU defence package and the partnership with NATO, from the adoption of the Global Strategy to the work done with the UN and the African Union to rescue migrants in Libya – it would be simply impossible even to mention, in a short editorial, all the defining moments and processes that made those years unique to me.

Rather than choosing one or two stories out of the many that have constituted the diplomatic and the defence work done from 2014 to 2019, I take the opportunity to focus on two underlying factors that are recurrently presented as major impediments to the development of a proper EU Foreign and Security Policy. I will try to share here some considerations that derive from my direct experience, and that contradict these two assumptions that are often repeated as an absolute, self-evident truth.

The first is that the High Representative/Vice President, as defined in the Lisbon Treaty, is 'an impossible job'. The second is that 'the EU doesn't have a foreign policy' or 'doesn't speak with one voice'. I have always been convinced that none of these two considerations is true, and my five years in office have consolidated my arguments.

First, let's look at the 'impossibility factor' of the role. The Lisbon Treaty introduced a unique element of institutional complexity with the creation of the HR/VP, with a mix of competences, responsibilities, and constituencies, that positions him or her at the crossroad of almost all the EU institutions: President of the Council (in the different formations of the Foreign Affairs Council – Foreign Affairs, Defence, Development, possibly Trade), Vice President of the Commission, Head of the European Defence Agency, and with

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the direct responsibility of the European External Action Service with its Headquarters and the more than 140 EU Delegations around the world. Not by coincidence, the European External Action Service is located at Rond-point Schumann, equally distant, or rather equally close to the Council and the Commission.

This unique institutional mix and its complexity do represent a challenge – but also an incredible asset. The first difficulty lies in explaining it to partners and interlocutors, who don't ask anymore 'what number should I call?', as Kissinger used to, but 'how should I call you?' – with some recurring to the easiest simplification: 'the EU Foreign Minister'. The second challenge is the density of duties and responsibilities that lead to an almost impossible agenda that requires energy, focus, and an excellent team that prepares and follows up all the files, making the impossible possible. But beyond the challenge of having the longest title on earth, and managing the agendas of a Vice President, a Foreign Minister and a Defence Minister combined, the main element that many identify as the 'impossibility factor' of the role, is its institutional complexity in itself. The High Representative chairs and represents the Council, while the Vice President is bound by the collegiality of the Commission, and leads the work of all Commissioners on all files of external relevance – a growing number of them, as more and more policies do imply today an external projection. This means that every time the Council and the Commission express different, diverging or conflicting views, there is an existential dilemma for the individual who has the duty to represent both. This challenge was very clear to me from the outset, having been part of the Council myself, as the Foreign Minister of a Member State, but coming from a national and political background that gave me what I would call a natural orientation towards a communitarian rather than an intergovernmental approach. My very first objective was to help bridging the gap across Rond-point Schuman, trying to develop a cooperative approach among and within institutions. This is why my very first decision was to move my main office and the cabinet to the Commission building, the Berlaymont, to signal the intention to play the role of Vice President in full, to facilitate daily contacts between my team and those of other Commissioners, Vice Presidents and President, and to ensure that the preparation of relevant decisions, that required both the Commission's and the Council's active consent, was conducted from the very initial phases in an inclusive manner, incorporating concerns and viewpoints of different institutional stakeholders already at the stage of the preparation of decisions.

Every time I have heard Commission and Council colleagues referring to each other as 'us and them', it was a chance for me or my team to remind us all that the institutional culture had to move from a competitive or even confrontational one, to a cooperative one, first of all because it would have helped us all delivering on

our collective responsibilities, but also because neither the European citizens nor our partners in the world make any distinction between different institutions: out there, outside of 'the bubble', we are all 'the European Union', and as such, we are all, together, responsible for taking decisions and delivering collectively. The EEAS is perfectly positioned to serve as a bridge, a connector, as it facilitates and supports a coherent, coordinated and common work of all institutions on all external files: the Council and the Member States, the Commission, the Parliament. I could always count there on an excellent and diverse mix of professionals coming from all different institutional backgrounds, making of the EEAS the perfect incubator of a truly European 'esprit de corps'.

Two experiences in particular represent excellent examples of building bridges among the institutions: the preparation and then implementation of the Global Strategy, most notably the work on defence; and the monthly meetings of Commissioners on External Action. In both cases the complexity of the institutional role that the Lisbon Treaty assigns to the High Representative/Vice President was vital. Without the three hats (Council, Commission, European Defence Agency) the consensus building and the coherence of work on the EU defence package would have been simply impossible. And the monthly meetings of all Commissioners and Vice Presidents on external action helped preparing decisions that were then taken by the Foreign Affairs Council, in all different fields – from trade to defence, from migration to humanitarian or development aid. In both cases, the presumed 'impossibility factor' of the institutional complexity of the role was instrumental to preparing and building consensus and fostering coherence in implementation.

So, not only 'the job is possible', but it wouldn't be possible to do it without that unique mix of competences.

The second assumption that is often presented as a matter of fact is that the EU doesn't have a Foreign policy and doesn't 'speak with one voice'. I have always contested this approach. The purpose is not having one single voice, as the richness of the choir would get lost, but rather keeping the diversity that characterizes twenty-seven different historical and geographical approaches to Foreign and Security Policy, and reaching one single set of policy decisions that can be supported and implemented by all in a coordinated and coherent manner. The thermometer of the unity is not the different tone of the doorsteps of Ministers entering the Council, but the number of common decisions taken at the end of the meetings. And despite the difficulties, only once or twice in five years a decision on a common policy was not taken because of lack of consensus. This is possible because the EU policy doesn't substitute the national ones, it complements and empowers them, and makes it possible for all the twenty-seven to have an impact on a global scene where otherwise each of them, separately, would count very

little. Member States are not divided between small and big ones, but between those that are small, and those that have not yet realized they are. The EU foreign and security policy is the only way for Member States to exercise effectively their national policies. As such, it's not 'ceding sovereignty' but rather the only way to 'regain sovereignty' in our globalized world of continent-size powers.

I could mention hundreds of examples of unity built and kept despite enormous pressures – the Iran nuclear deal and support to Ukraine, to mention just two sensitive ones. Never once, in five years, we faced a situation where I could not 'speak on behalf of the EU'. What happened often, on the contrary, is that on some sensitive issues Member States expected the EU to express their position in order to avoid being exposed bilaterally to unpleasant repercussions. The Union is a shield.

I don't ignore nor deny that there is a trend to emphasize intergovernmental dynamics and national approaches in all fields of EU policy. But my own experience tells me that this happens first and foremost on internal issues, with relevant repercussions also on external ones.

The Union I have seen has a voice and uses it, even if it is often heard and appreciated more outside than inside our territory – be it as a security provider with its missions and operations, as a diplomatic power with facilitation and mediation in peace processes, as an economic and trade partner, as a development and humanitarian superpower, and most of all as a voice of wisdom and rationality in support of cooperation and multilateralism in such difficult times.