



# EU foreign policy through the lens of practice theory: A different approach to the European External Action Service

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## Abstract

There is a proliferation of works on the new European External Action Service (EEAS). Most of these approach the EEAS through a rationalist framework, assessing how a new institution can solve long-term questions of EU foreign policy-making to ensure consistency and coherence while reducing transaction costs between actors (both supranational and national) in a multilevel governance structure. This paper takes a different direction. Using 30 interviews with officials from the EEAS, the European Commission, and national ministries of foreign affairs, conducted between 2010 and 2013, it shows how the study of practice aids understanding of the nature of the EEAS. As a new institution, the EEAS lends itself particularly well to practice-based study because new institutions must develop new practices.

The first section of the article defines the notion of practice and shows the importance of historicizing the struggles around practices in understanding the creation of the EEAS. The second section demonstrates how agents' practices shape professional cultures within the EEAS. The third section highlights the relationship between practices and rule-making. Going over the EEAS as a case study, the conclusion focuses on the importance of analysing actors' practices for understanding the current evolution of diplomacy and international relations in general.

## Keywords

European External Action Service, foreign policy, institutions, organizations, practice theory

## Introduction

The European External Action Service (EEAS), a new EU foreign policy institution created in January 2010, is already drawing a lot of scholarly interest. Most of the proliferation of books and special issues of academic journals (Balfour and Raik, 2013; *Hague Journal*

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*of Diplomacy*, 2012; *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2013) assess how this new institution can potentially solve recurrent questions about EU foreign policy to best ensure consistency, coherence, and the reduction of transaction costs between multiple actors.

This paper takes another direction. Its main objective is to demonstrate – using 30 interviews conducted between 2010 and 2013 with officials from the EEAS, the Commission, and national ministries of foreign affairs – the utility of studying agents' practices in understanding the nature of the new institution. By practices, I mean patterns of action, which, in being performed by the agents, reflect not only their rational or material interests at the moment 't', but also their representation of an issue integrated as socially meaningful (Adler and Pouliot, 2011). The study of practices shows that we cannot consider institutions in a purely instrumental perspective, as most rational institutionalists and neo-realists do (see Jönsson and Tallberg, 2008). Institutions actually produce rules. By rules, I mean informal and formal terms of reference that are collectively accepted, and often written down, by the agents to facilitate their collective action (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013). But these rules are not just external constraints that allow the agents to solve the problems of collective action. Institutions are human creations that change and evolve through the interests but also the subjective representations of the agency. To understand rule-making, you must start identifying practices.

The 'practice turn' in social sciences (Schatzki et al., 2001) supports the methodological assumption that the social scientist must do field work to explain the world. 'Since the world cannot be grasped outside of language' (Neumann, 2002: 628), there is no alternative to the study of agents' practices, analysing through interviews and observation what the agents do, but also the meaning they give to what they do in their discourses (see also the introduction to this journal's 2015 issue on methodological challenges). Having a strong empirical narrative becomes a strength contrasting that of so-called theoretical parsimony, which makes so many IR works totally disconnected from the phenomenon they pretend to explain.

The EEAS lends itself particularly well to a practices approach: it is a nascent institution characterized by the invention of new rules to deal with EU foreign policy. Typically, there is no single rule design or rule designer. It is the practices of multiple agents, who seek to expand their respective social representations of a policy field, combined with their interests at the moment 't' of the decision, that make the creation of the new rules possible.

The first section of the article defines the notion of practice and elucidates the importance of historicizing the struggles around the creation of the EEAS, stressing the role played by each collective agent's practices in the negotiation of a new institution. The second section demonstrates how practices shape professional cultures within the EEAS. The third section insists on the relationship between agency practices and rule-making by the EEAS. Going beyond the case study, the conclusion emphasizes on the importance of practices in understanding the current evolutions of diplomacy and international relations in general.

## Historicizing the creation of a new institution

Vincent Pouliot writes that 'constructing the positional logic of international practices comprises three tasks: first, interpreting the rules of the game; second, mapping the distribution

of resources; and third historicizing social struggles' (2012: 52). In this first section, I historicize the EEAS precisely in order not to lose sight of the exchanges and struggles between the different agents in its creation. Historicizing the exchanges and struggles among the agency is crucial, because institution building cannot be reduced to a compromise between rational agents who manage transaction costs. This differentiates my approach from many of the bureaucratic politics approaches used to study foreign policy-making (Allison and Zelikow, 1999; Halperin and Clapp, 2006; see also the Introduction to the 2015 Special Issue, *Cooperation and Conflict*). The EEAS is not seen just as a rational compromise between bureaucratic agencies that are competing and cooperating to make EU foreign policy effective (Lequesne, 2013). The EEAS emerges from an exchange of practices, formatted in the history of the European Union, that encompass subjective representations. The latter can be independent of the consciousness and desires of the agents, constituting what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called a *habitus* (1972, 1979).

The Treaty of Lisbon created the post of High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who was also appointed Vice-President of the Commission in charge of foreign affairs (HR/VP) in December 2009. The Treaty's Article 27 adds that this 'High Representative shall be assisted by a European External Action Service (EEAS)', which would 'work in cooperation with the diplomatic services of the Member States'. The Briton Catherine Ashton, a politician from the British Labour Party, is the first appointee to hold the post (Spence, 2012).

In March 2010, the HR/VP – surrounded by a steering committee made up of 13 members from the Commission, the Secretariat General of the EU Council of Ministers and the Spanish, Belgian and Hungarian presidencies – submitted a proposal outlining the future functioning of the EEAS. On 26 July 2010, a final compromise paved the way for a formal decision of the EU Council of Ministers establishing the new institution (EU Council, 2010).<sup>1</sup> I will now analyse how the practices of each collective agent – the Commission, European Parliament, Secretariat General of the Council of Ministers and member states – have shaped the EEAS.

### *The Commission*

The Commission is a supranational institution that is both a political body and a bureaucracy. The political body is represented by the President of the Commission and the 27 other Commissioners, mostly former ministers in national governments appointed to five year terms by heads of states and governments and the European Parliament (Chang and Monar, 2013).

Academics have largely neglected the College of Commissioners as a negotiating forum, as the secrecy surrounding negotiations makes it difficult to obtain concrete information on what occurs between commissioners (Joana and Smith, 2002) We know that the College of Commissioners makes decisions through majority rule and that each of its 28 members has significant autonomy vis-à-vis the President and their colleagues. It is also part of the College's informal rules that each Commissioner does not interfere with his/her colleagues' area of competence (Ban, 2013)

In the distribution of portfolios inside the College composed in February 2010, re-elected President Jose Manuel Barroso denied the HR/VP – dependent upon both him as

VP but also from the European Council (member states) as HR – power to supervise all EU foreign policy issues. He instead created a portfolio specifically for the enlargement policy and the neighbourhood policy which went to the Czech commissioner. Similarly, President Barroso insisted that the portfolios for development aid, international cooperation, humanitarian aid and response to crises as well as that of trade policy were retained by specific commissioners rather than the HR/VP. The political decision to divide these portfolios aimed to ensure that the HR/VP, and consequently the member states, would not have direct responsibility over all aspects of EU foreign policy (Spence, 2012).

Through the same reasoning, President Barroso ensured that the new external delegations of the EU replacing the delegations of the Commission, while placed under the responsibility of the new HR/VP, would remain largely composed of Commission officials (Dimier, 2006; Vogel, 2010). Finally, the President and the commissioners in charge of sectorial aspects of the EU foreign policy made sure that the Commission bureaucracy remains responsible for the budget of the major EU programmes operating in third countries.<sup>2</sup> These funds, accounting for 12 billion euros in 2010, were not moved to the purview of the EEAS.

I do not deny that Barroso's decisions reflect a logic of interests concerned with preserving, at a certain moment, the power of the Commissioners (sectorial autonomy) and that of the Commission bureaucracy (management of funds). But such a rational explanation is not sufficient. Barroso's manoeuvres also reflect the practices evident in the Commission since 1952. A major practice consists of assuming that belonging to a supranational institution requires a claim of autonomy from the member states. For the Commission agents, accepting the transfer of too many competences on foreign policy issues to the HR/VP and the EEAS would contradict the subjective representation of their autonomy from the member states that gives a meaning to their daily work.

### *The European Parliament*

The European Parliament (EP) was the first institution to mobilize over the creation of the EEAS, even before formal inter-institutional negotiations started. In October 2009, the assembly adopted a report presented by the German deputy Elmar Brok on the future institutional design of the EEAS by a vote of 424 in favour, 94 against and 30 abstentions (Brok, 2009). In this vote, a vast majority of European deputies among the four main political parties (Centre-right European Peoples' Party, Socialist, Liberal and Green) supported Elmar Brok's proposal to locate the EEAS *inside* the Commission (Raube, 2012). Again, this proposal can only be understood with awareness of the practice of the MEPs. This practice has first of all to do with exercising democratic principles in budgetary control. The MEPs consider that one of their *raison d'être* within the EU is to control the operating budgets. There existed long-established rules to control the budgets on foreign policy issues managed by the Commission, and the Parliament did not want this oversight authority moved to EEAS. The MEPs' practice has also to do with the general meaning they assign to their institution within the EU polity. As representatives of a supranational institution themselves, a majority of the MEPs supported fully embedding the EEAS inside the Commission, which they considered as *the* other institution representing and defending the supranational autonomy of the EU against the member states.

In the end, the MEPs did not succeed in embedding the EEAS inside the Commission, but they did draw two major concessions: the new HR/VP promised to regularly attend the EP plenary sessions and to answer the deputies' questions on the EU foreign policy;<sup>3</sup> and the responsibility for the operating budgets on the EU foreign policy programmes remained in the hands of the Commission.

### *The Secretariat General of the EU Council*

In the literature, the EU Council of Ministers is rarely described as an institution with a collective identity. However, through its permanent Secretariat General (SG), the Council can be considered an institution in possession of a specific organizational identity (Hayes Renshaw and Wallace, 2006; Mangenot, 2003). After the reform introduced in 1999 by the Treaty of Amsterdam, Javier Solana, the Spanish Secretary General of the EU Council, became the first High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, retaining this position for 10 years. As the former Secretary General of NATO, Javier Solana had managed to develop inside the SG a strong expertise on the common foreign and security policy (CFSP), and even more on the common security and defence policy (CSDP). He produced in 2003 the only report that the EU ever published on a European security strategy (Secretary General of the EU Council, 2003) and established the first crisis management and planning directorate (CMPD), respected by the EU member states for their management of civil and military crisis (Dijkstra, 2008).

With the creation of the EEAS, the SG had to transfer all its expertise on CFSP and CSDP to the EEAS. The move provoked strong concern among the SG staff, as the Solana period had raised its profile and legitimacy considerably on such 'hard' policy issues. Where the Commission staff was used for managing programmes on soft power issues (development aid, humanitarian diplomacy, etc.), the SG staff considered itself to be comprised of specialists in defence and security policy, with practices close to the political directorates of the national Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFAs).

The civilian planning and conduct capability (CPCC), military staff of the European Union (EUMS) and situation centre (SITCEN) were fully transferred to the EEAS, but the former SG practice never disappeared (Weiss, 2010: 5). Located in a separate building from the rest of the EEAS, the former SG's staff for crisis management and peace building (including a large number of military officers seconded by the member states) constitutes a world of its own inside the EEAS.<sup>4</sup> They relate to a meaning of the EU foreign policy very different from those of the EEAS staff coming from the Commission, making reference to crisis, war and peace, rather than economic cooperation. The specific practices of the former SG's agents inside the EEAS has been pointed to in the review report produced by the office of the HR/VP in 2013, when it makes note that 'ways should be explored of making their expertise more widely and directly available of other policy departments' (EEAS, 2013: 6).

### *The member states*

National diplomats have their own practices relating to EU foreign policy. Regardless of member state, national diplomats interviewed for this research stressed that the EEAS

can only be an additional resource and not a substitute to their respective MFAs.<sup>5</sup> This refers to the long-established practice that any foreign policy requires states, and as the EU is not a state, only the member states can make the EU foreign policy effective (Adler-Nissen, 2014). During negotiations on the Treaty of Lisbon, the EU member states took a number of precautions with respect to the EEAS, which were reflected in the final text. Inspired by the British government, Declaration 13 states that the establishment of the EEAS should not ‘affect the responsibilities of the Member States, as they currently exist, for the formulation and conduct of their foreign policies nor of their national representation in third countries and international organizations’.

If national diplomats are not prepared to transfer all their tasks to a new EU institution, it is not only because their interests inside the MFAs shall be rationally protected. It is also because they consider that any foreign policy remains primarily the commitment of states negotiating in a world that is still inter-statist. IR scholars who defend the neo-realist paradigm are just continuing to reproduce the same representation of the international system (Brecher and Harvey, 2002).

Nuances have to be introduced, because the EU member states reflect a logic of diversity (Bulmer and Lequesne, 2013). Although a small-versus-large member state cleavage is rare in the EU (Hayes Renshaw et al., 2006; Plechanova, 2010), such a split played a role in the creation of the EEAS. Politicians and diplomats from the small member states such as Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden saw in the EEAS the opportunity to add new resources to their national diplomacies, while their opposite numbers from larger member states like Germany, France, Poland and the United Kingdom saw the opportunity to project their national diplomacies into the EU. It is not by chance that the French MFA insisted that one of its senior diplomats, Pierre Vimont, former French Ambassador to the United States, was appointed Executive Secretary General of the EEAS. Germany and Poland did the same in imposing two of their national diplomats, respectively Helga Schmid and Maciej Popowski, into the posts of Deputy Secretary Generals.<sup>6</sup> Projecting national diplomacy inside the EEAS is not solely a rational choice maximizing a so-called national interest. It also goes with the perception by national diplomats that a foreign policy has no meaning if it is not controlled by states, and especially *big* states, because the international system remains inter-statist.<sup>7</sup> In the case of CFSP in particular, a ‘communautarization’ of the EU, giving a power of initiative to the Commission and a power of co-decision to the EP, still has no meaning for the majority of EU national diplomats (Spence, 2012).

This first section demonstrates how the creation of the EEAS requires identifying practices and exchanges of practices among agents that took part in the pre-operational phase of negotiations. Practices ‘are repeated or at least reproduce similar behaviours with regular meanings’ (Adler and Pouliot, 2011: 6) over time and space, and this is why they have to be understood within a historicized account.

## Practices shape professional cultures

This second section deals with the practices imported by the agents inside the EEAS after the institution started its operational work. The EEAS is an amalgamation of different groups of agents and their different practices: first, Commission civil servants from the



former Directorate-General for External Relations (DG RELEX) and the former Commission delegations, as well as a few from the Directorate-General for Development and Cooperation (DEVCO); second, civil servants from the SG of the Council who previously worked on CFSP/CSDP in the former policy unit and in Directorate-General E; and finally, national diplomats from the member states' MFAs.<sup>8</sup>

In December 2011, the EEAS employed 3611 bureaucrats, of which 1551 worked in the central headquarters in Brussels and 2060 in the 140 EU delegations. At that point, 90% of the transferred staff came from the Commission and the SG of the Council of Ministers. Member states sought to rebalance the institution over the following years through appointing national diplomats, hoping to achieve a ratio of such appointments comprising one third of the total staff as agreed upon in the Council decision to establish the EEAS (EU Council, 2010). In June 2013, the target was nearly met, with national diplomats representing 32.9% of all EEAS staff (EEAS, 2013: 19). The national diplomats can stay a maximum of 10 years within the EEAS (two contracts of four years plus two extra years), after which they are supposed to return to their national ministries (Lequesne, 2013).

Scholars and practitioners rightly raise the question of a new esprit de corps within the EEAS resulting from a fusion of different professional cultures (Juncos and Pomorska, 2013, 2014). The EEAS review report from June 2013 observes that 'combining different traditions and organisational cultures' poses complex challenges (EEAS, 2013: 4).

I assume from my interviews that differences of professional cultures persist and split the EEAS staff into two groups: the Commission/SG officials on one side, and the national diplomats on the other. It is here that the notion of practice finds its explanatory relevance. The split in professional cultures does not reflect only the material capabilities and/or limitations of each group to assume concrete tasks; it also reflects the subjective perception by each group of what it and the other group are able to do. Here, the notion of *habitus* used by Pierre Bourdieu provides a useful analytical tool. Bourdieu writes that a habitus is 'at the same time a principle that generates practices to be objectively classified but also a system of classification (*principius divisionis*) of these practices' (1979: 190). Within the EEAS, each group considers the other group based on criteria that it is able or not able to perform certain tasks. This classification assures each group of its own 'logic of distinction' in the management of the EU foreign policy (Bourdieu, 1979; also see Kuus, 2015).

The former Commission's staff constitutes firstly a group who suspect the national diplomats of being recruited to the EEAS in order to impose their statist practices on EU foreign policy. One Commission official, who used to work at the EEAS before going back to DEVCO, declared: 'The foreign policy made by the EU is not the one I chose when I entered the Commission in the 1980s. For me, an efficient foreign policy requires the defence of an EU interest and national diplomats are not used to doing so'.<sup>9</sup> Second, Commission officials consider national diplomats to be bad managers who are not able to master the complex budgetary rules of the Commission that the EEAS must also enforce. A DEVCO official says: 'Heads of Delegations coming from the national diplomacy are afraid of the Commission rules. They sometimes refuse their personal responsibility of budgetary management, because they are not accustomed to such rules in most of the national MFAs'.<sup>10</sup>

As a second group, national diplomats consider that their colleagues from the Commission and the SG are not able to write political reports, especially when they work in EU delegations abroad. A senior official, coming from a background of national diplomacy, points out:

I see right away by its style whether a report is written by an official trained as a national diplomat, or whether it is written by an official from the Commission. The first delivers a concise analysis of the political situation in the country of accreditation, while the second will attempt to do so.<sup>11</sup>

Each group is perceived by the other group as possessing specific practices that confirm the logics of distinction.

In interviews, officials regularly expressed firm opinions on the other group without being able to support their assertions with concrete examples. This demonstrates practice as a disposition to give meaning to actions that go beyond the description of concrete facts or events. For instance, according to one French national diplomat:

People from the Commission serving in the EU delegations, their first reflex when a country enters a war or a deep crisis is to go back to Brussels for security matters. We, national diplomats, our first reflex is to stay by any means, because it is during a crisis that our job reaches a maximum utility.<sup>12</sup>

When I asked him to provide a concrete example, he was not able to tell me any.

The different practices of the EEAS staff do not mean that the different groups of agents are unable to work together or build common rules for collective action, as we will see in the next section. It means that the establishment of any rule results from the representations the two groups of agents have in mind. The meaning given by the agency to the EU foreign policy is a crucial element that will frame any new rule.

## Understanding EEAS rule-making

In this third part, I will show that the mapping of agents' practices is useful for understanding how rules are made in a new institution. In the EEAS, these new rules are linked to three functions that staff under the responsibility of the HR/VP has been developing since 2010: first, coordinating the positions of the various agents involved in the EU foreign policy-making; second, providing added value information on foreign policy; and third, promoting new ideas.

### *Coordination building*

A huge part of the literature on the EU foreign policy emphasizes the need for coordination and consistency in conducting a multilevel polity. It often concludes that the many transaction costs between agents explain a lack of effectiveness in EU foreign policy. As Christopher Bickerton points out, this kind of discussion 'equates effectiveness with the institutional centralization typical of modern nation-states' (2011: 172–173). To



complete this relevant remark, it could be added that the unitary nature of states in the shaping of foreign policies is often mythologized. Comparative studies show that states (including the 28 EU member states) often face similar elements of fragmentation between the ministries of foreign affairs and other central ministries, as well as between central and subnational governments (Paquin, 2010).

The EEAS sits at the centre of a coordination function which encourages the establishment of new rules. The notion of coordination has inspired a huge body of academic literature. For Okhuysen and Bechky, coordination is ‘the process of interaction that integrates a collective set of independent tasks’ (2009: 463). In the case of the EEAS, this process runs along two axes: horizontal coordination between the EU member states and those EU institutions that have competences and expertise in the development of EU foreign policy, particularly the Commission; and vertical coordination between the 28 EU member states which have not relinquished their respective national foreign policies.

The *horizontal* coordination between the EEAS and the Commission is the most contentious issue, as it refers to the potentially conflicting relationship between the HR/VP and the other commissioners in charge of foreign affairs (Vanhoonaeker and Pomorska, 2013). As mentioned above, the EEAS did not subsume management of development aid programmes or humanitarian and civil aid, which remain under the control of DEVCO and other Commission bureaucratic units, such as ECHO or the Foreign Policy Instrument (FPI).<sup>13</sup>

Each group of agents inside the EEAS and inside the Commission (DEVCO in particular) wants to keep its formal competences on the coordination process, not only to preserve its interests but also on account of its practices. However, potential conflicts between the EEAS and the Commission have to be nuanced by the fact that the EEAS includes former Commission officials who shared experiences in previous posts with their DEVCO and FPI colleagues.<sup>14</sup> They know about the ‘other’ group’s practices. For the inter-institutional relationships between the EEAS and the Commission, previously shared experiences offer a resource for inventing new coordination rules. On the issue of civilian aid, a Commission official from FPI observes:

It was very contentious in the beginning of EEAS, because we did not know who was in charge of what and because the relationship between the HR/VP Ashton and Commissioner Georgieva was tense. But as I knew most of my EEAS colleagues from a previous post in RELEX, I decided to meet and think with them about coordination rules.<sup>15</sup>

Practices of the agency frame informal rules which, after a certain time, can become formal rules (on formal and informal rules, see Wiseman, 2015). The EEAS review report from June 2013 states that ‘the EEAS and the Commission agreed [on] detailed working arrangements covering co-operation on instructions and management of work in EU delegations, [and] specific arrangements for joint work on the programming and implementation of the EU external programmes’ (EEAS, 2013: 9).<sup>16</sup> These new rules have been framed by the agents’ practices, a causal explanation that only interviews with the agents can demonstrate. Such a causal relationship between practice and rule was already observed by other scholars in the context of the EU. Didier Bigo, for instance,

demonstrated that the institutionalization of the EU police cooperation in the 1980s could only be explained if you analysed first the practices of European policemen on security (1992). For institutional theory, this shows clearly that the analysis of the agency must precede any understanding of the structure (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013).

Officials from the EEAS and from the national MFAs also agreed on new rules aimed to ensure *vertical* coordination of the EU foreign policy between the EEAS and the member states. One new formal rule is the permanent chairmanship by EEAS officials of the Political and Security Committee and the working groups of the EU Council of Ministers in the area of CFSP and external relations. Whereas these positions had earlier been filled according to the member states' rotating presidencies, this change provides institutional coherence, as the HR/VP has become the permanent chair of all the sessions of the Council on Foreign Affairs, development, and defence issues. The main Council working groups dealing with foreign policy are now integrated into the EEAS flow chart, such as the working groups on Asia (COASI), Africa (COAFR), or human rights (COHOM).

For the EEAS officials in charge of chairing these committees, the new task has become a full time job. National diplomats from the MFAs have accepted that the chairmanships of the EU Council working groups go to EEAS agents not only because they perceive an improvement of effectiveness, but mostly because several EEAS chairpersons come from national diplomacies and share their practices.<sup>17</sup> Regarding CFSP, an official from the French Permanent Representation declares: 'Entrusting the chairmanship of working groups to national diplomats inside the EEAS is for us a guarantee that all the work developed by the rotating presidencies will be transferred to the EEAS'.<sup>18</sup> Again, the habitus of a certain group of agents (in this case, the national diplomats) legitimizes the creation of rules in the context of a new institution.

In EU delegations located in third countries, EEAS officials have also developed new rules of vertical coordination with diplomats from the EU national embassies. The time has passed where a French Ambassador in an African country would refuse to speak with the commission representative because he did not consider him/her as a fellow member of the diplomatic corps. In third countries, EU heads of delegations now hold coordination meetings with the ambassadors of the member states on a regular basis.

There are, however, limits to the development of new rules of vertical coordination in third countries. Interviews reveal, for instance, that British diplomats in Beirut refused in 2011 to acknowledge that the EU Head of Delegation in Lebanon had organized meetings on consular affairs.<sup>19</sup> The official argument from the UK ambassador was that consular affairs, according to the EU treaties, remained a national competence of the member states. This is fully supported by the practice of the group of national diplomats: for them, national sovereignty remains an important component of foreign policy-making and introduces a clear limit to what an EU foreign policy can achieve.

Vertical coordination between the EEAS and the member states is even more difficult within multilateral international organizations (IOs). The EU has no common rule for its representation in the different IOs and multilateral forums. There are huge differences of status from one IO to another and it is an issue for struggles between the EU and the member states that has proven a godsend for legal scholars (Kuijper et al., 2013). In the World Trade Organization, the EU has the same membership status that its individual member states do: Commission officials represent the 28 EU member states in trade

negotiations in Geneva. In the United Nations (UN) system, the EU is not represented in the same way within the specialized institutions. Since May 2011, the EU has an observer status at the UN general assembly, while the 28 states are full members.<sup>20</sup> At the UN Security Council, the EU has no representation as such, although the HR/VP is invited to address EU positions, as provided for by Article 34 of the treaty on European Union.

However, officials from the EU delegations in New York, Geneva, and Vienna chair meetings to coordinate the positions of the 28 member states. In New York, the EEAS staff organize some 1300 meetings a year in order to reconcile the positions of the member states at the UN.<sup>21</sup> Overall, coordination rules before the UN general assembly work well. The reason is the practice of national diplomats: there is little contention over what EU foreign policy should be on soft policy issues such as human rights or rule of law. The vertical coordination is more difficult at the UN Security Council, because national diplomats do not give the same meaning to EU foreign policy when it concerns hard policy issues, like security and defence.<sup>22</sup> In June 2011, the German representative to the EU Security Council (non-permanent member) abstained on Resolution 1973 creating a 'no-fly zone' and calling for an immediate cease-fire in Libya, while the French and British representatives (permanent members) voted in favour, with their American colleague. Similarly, in October 2011, the vote on the Palestine's application for permanent membership in UNESCO gave rise to a complete lack of vertical coordination between EU member states (*Le Monde*, 2011). These examples show that agents do not succeed in creating rules of collective action just to reduce transaction costs, as rationalist institutionalists assume, or because they socialize in meetings, as the constructivists say (Hermann et al., 2004). Understanding the role that the EEAS plays in the coordination of EU foreign policy requires an inventory of the practices that the different groups of agents have, and an analysis of the struggles over these practices. There is, importantly, a direct causal relationship between these practices and the making of rules.

### *Information sharing*

The share of information through various technical networks is a crucial resource for modern diplomacy (Berridge, 2010; Heine, 2013). EEAS officials often state that their new institution will better exchange information between the EU institutions and the national MFAs and improve EU foreign policy. In the interviews I conducted between 2010 and 2013, EEAS officials regularly stressed that the EEAS should elaborate new rules for increasing the exchange of diplomatic information, as is already the case for CFSP/CSDP with the Coreu network system and for consular affairs with the Visa information system (Bicchi, 2012). The establishment of a new system of encrypted cables to generalize the exchange of all political reports produced by the EEAS, the Commission and the 28 MFAs, was cited by all interviewees as a potential added value.<sup>23</sup>

It is interesting to note that such a proposal has never been really put forward in the agenda of the EU Council of Ministers (EU Council, 2013). National diplomats from the MFAs are, in fact, not prepared to accept an EU-wide diffusion of all the cables they are producing. The reasons have to do both with interests and practices. To take the rational reason first, EU national diplomats remain competitors in third countries, especially where economic and trade diplomacy are concerned. In China, for instance, it is not

natural for German and French diplomats to systematically share their information on the country's situation, as their national companies are in competition for contracts. But a rationalist explanation must absolutely be complemented by a practice argument: whatever the rationality of a better exchange of diplomatic information (especially for CFSP/CDSP matters), sending cables and reports to his/her national minister remains for the national diplomat a *raison d'être*. The writing of 'secret' cables and reports to the state authorities is a task which still gives a meaning to the job of a national diplomat (Adler-Nissen, 2014; Davis et al., 2000; also see Cornut, 2015).

Information sharing is a relevant issue to demonstrate how agency practices can prevent the development of new rules within the EEAS. Interviews show that, on this question, national diplomats working inside the EEAS are not necessarily on the same page as national diplomats still working in the national MFAs. The first favour a more ambitious system of EU information sharing, and are closer to the EEAS's colleagues coming either from the Commission or the SG of the EU Council of Ministers.<sup>24</sup> To go back to Bourdieu, the logic of distinction can be subject to shifts according to the issues (1979). It is important to consider Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* as a dynamic, not static, disposition of agency behaviour.

### *Producing new ideas for EU diplomacy*

Since the 1990s, IR scholars have produced a lot of work on the special status of ideas in IR. As Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane write, 'even if we accept the rationality premise, actions taken by human beings depend on the substantive quality of available ideas, since such ideas help to clarify principal and conceptions of causal relationships, and to coordinate individual behaviour' (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993: 5). One of the questions linked to the creation of the EEAS is the ability of its agents to contribute original ideas to the EU agenda.

Vanhoonacker and Pomorska (2013: 1318) rightly stress that 'in a system of multi-level governance such as the EU, the potential number of venues is considerable, triggering Guy B. Peters to call it an agenda-setting paradise'. All interviews conducted inside the EEAS, the national Permanent Representations and the Commission alluded to the absence of a real principle of hierarchy for the production of foreign policy ideas within the EU. This general remark 'has to be nuanced in the intergovernmental area of CFSP, where the principal decision-maker continues to be the Council' (Vanhoonacker and Pomorska, 2013: 1318).

This absence of hierarchy is a component of all EEAS agents' practice. They are not any more or less able than other EU agents to generate ideas on foreign policy issues and to seize opportunities. It was under the Polish presidency in 2011 that the idea of a road map for the EU Eastern Partnership was launched within the Europe and Central Asia Managerial Directorate of the EEAS.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the idea of a Regional Maritime Capacity for the Horn of Africa came from the Crisis Management and Planning Department of the EEAS in 2012.<sup>26</sup>

In accordance with the non-hierarchical practice, EEAS agents are able to produce ideas as long as they remain issue-specific and short term. They are not in a position to produce strategic ideas on the future of EU foreign policy. The limit is accentuated by the

weak leadership of the HR/VP, mainly due to the position's low public visibility. The linguistic segmentation of the European public space makes public visibility difficult in general, especially – as is the case with Catherine Ashton – when the HR/VP speaks only his/her mother language (Fossum and Schlesinger, 2007). This lack of discursive capacity from the HR/VP introduces a difference between the HR/VP and the national ministries of foreign affairs, who build their own leadership through discursive activity in their respective national public spaces. EEAS agents coming from national diplomacies often speak of disappointment, as their practice of foreign policy gave them a larger audience. Some of them even regret the pre-Lisbon system, stressing that the national ministries of foreign affairs in charge of the EU presidencies were 'naturally' more able to publicize new ideas in discourses and to create leadership than the HR/VP.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

In his contribution to a forum published in the *International Studies Review* on the present and future of diplomatic studies, Geoffrey Wiseman insists that it is time for the theory of diplomacy 'to catch up with practice' (2011: 710). Iver B Neumann expresses the same demand in his reference article on the necessity for the study of diplomacy to 'bring practice back in' in accordance with the linguistic turn in the social sciences (2002: 629).

Based on a study of one case – the EEAS – this article leads me to four general comments in connection with the broader debate over the 'practice turn' in IR theory. First, as has been recently emphasized by Christian Bueger, the turn to practice for the study of international relations 'is not primarily about theory, but about the practice of doing research' (Bueger, 2014: 385). I consider that what we need urgently to reinvigorate research in IR is a methodology capable of capturing the relationship between the actions (decisions, policies, etc.) and the agents. There is no understanding of IR without a qualitative and interpretative approach to agency in its everyday work. It means that IR research requires more systematically ethnographic and sociological works. Participant observation, agents' interviews and document interpretations are the main sources of such research. To understand the agents' knowledge, scholars also need to invest the agents' sites that are '[in] essence a certain locale, a place composed of practices and material arrangements' (Bueger, 2014: 392). This prerequisite goes against the idea that social sciences can limit themselves to research (quantitative or normative) done in the intimacy of an academic office. IR scholars need to go into the field, and research institutions need to subsidize fieldwork, not just computer-based data analysis. In this regard, rational choice analysis has done considerable damage to IR theory and to political science in general by creating an 'armchair academic' totally disengaged from the complexity of agents' knowledge.

Second, in capturing agents' practices, the scholar must consider what Anthony Giddens (1984) calls the 'habitual actions and discourses' (cited in Navari, 2011: 621). In this article, I use Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* to show that we cannot consider actions or policies simply as the outcomes of interests, as most rationalists would argue. Without denying the role of rational calculation by agents, I consider that their actions depend mostly on their background knowledge based on 'the acceptable, the possible and the

normal' (Ringmar, 2014: 9). If Bourdieusian sociology is highly contestable when it considers politics mainly as a domination process, the statement (mainly empirical) that agents act, perceive and think not only with regard to their interests, but via a system of durable dispositions, looks convincing. Practices are the 'sources of ontological stability in social life' (Adler and Pouliot, 2011: 18). But if practices form repetitive patterns, they are also permanently displacing and shifting. As Bueger writes, 'practices are dispersed, dynamic and continuously rearranging' (2014: 391).

Third, practices remind the IR scholar that the actions they study refer to historically accumulated trajectories and inclinations, or to what Adler and Pouliot call 'the dispositional' (2011: 6). History matters, and IR theory cannot escape history as a discipline. To understand an international policy or an international institution (such as the EEAS), the scholar cannot limit himself/herself to what he/she observes empirically during his/her participatory observation or interviews. They must also ask and interpret the past, and reconstitute the historical background that shapes the present. The study of IR cannot be de-historicized.

Finally, much IR research considers the role of rules or norms but takes them for granted. For neorealist scholars, for instance, rules are *ex nihilo* creations that facilitate collective action or reduce transaction costs between agents. They wrongly consider rules to be external from the agencies they are supposed to regulate. Practices remind us that rules are human creations that are shaped by what the agents consider – again – normal and meaningful. Practices are then essential to understanding the processes of institutionalization. They totally reverse the classic question of institutionalism: '*how do political institutions actually shape actors' behaviour?*' to show that it is the agents' backgrounds (both material and symbolic) that shape political institutions.

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### Notes

1. The term 'institution' is used as a concept of political science and not in the legal sense of the Treaty of Lisbon, which does not recognize the EEAS as a formal institution, contrary to the European Central Bank.
2. Interview, EU Commission, DEVCO, 15 February 2013.
3. Interview, Belgian permanent representation to the EU, 16 July 2010.
4. Interviews, EEAS, 21 February 2012 and 15 February 2013.
5. Interviews, French and British permanent representation to the EU, 16 July 2010, and Swedish representation to the EU, 21 February 2012.
6. Interviews, British and French permanent representations to the EU, 16 July 2010. See also EU Council (2010), Preamble: 1.



7. Interviews, British representation to the EU, 16 July 2010; French representation to the EU, 22 February 2012.
8. The departments of the Commission and of the SG of the council transferred to the EEAS are listed in the Annex of the Council Decision 2010/427/EU; EU Council (2010).
9. Interview 1, EU Commission, DEVCO, 15 February 2013.
10. Interview 2, EU Commission, DEVCO, 15 February 2013.
11. Interview, EEAS, 26 April 2011. Cornut (this volume) illustrates how diplomatic practices and habitus influence political reporting.
12. Interview, Paris, 26 November 2013.
13. Interview, EEAS, 16 July 2010.
14. Interview, EEAS, 15 February 2013.
15. Interview, FPI, 21 February 2012.
16. Interview, French permanent representation to the EU, 22 February 2012.
17. Interviews, French and Swedish permanent representations to the EU, 22 February 2012.
18. Interview, French permanent representation to the EU, 22 February 2012.
19. Interviews, EU delegation in Lebanon, 2 November 2011; French permanent representation to the EU, 22 February 2012.
20. The EU status of observer at the general assembly is the result of UN resolution A/65/276, adopted on 3 May 2011.
21. Website of the EU delegation to the UN, <http://www.eu-un.europa.eu>
22. Interview, French permanent representation to the EU, 22 February 2012.
23. Interviews, EEAS, 26 April 2011 and 21 February 2012.
24. Interviews, EEAS, 26 April 2011 and 21 February 2012.
25. Interview, EEAS, 21 February 2012.
26. Interview, EEAS, 22 February 2012.
27. Interview, EEAS, 22 February 2012.

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