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Abstract:

This article offers a nuanced balance sheet of the five-year term of Catherine Ashton as the EU's High Representative (2009-2014). It examines Ashton's record under four headings. First: the circumstances of her appointment and the decidedly rocky start to her term of office. Second: the creation of the *European External Action Service* (EEAS) and its interim evaluation. Third: the later years, which saw Ashton concentrate on a number of specific policy areas, some of which (Kosovo, Iran) were deemed successful and some of which (Ukraine, CSDP) were less so. Finally, it assesses the nature and status of the HR-VP position itself as its first incumbent handed over to her successor. Is this particular job a case of "mission impossible"?

Key words:

European Union; High Representative; EU foreign and security policy, European External Action Service

Résumé:

Le présent article se propose de revenir, de façon contrastée, sur le mandat de Catherine Ashton comme Haute-Représentante de l'UE (de 2009 à 2014). L'article examine la contribution d'Ashton sous quatre registres : En premier lieu, les circonstances de sa nomination et ses débuts résolument difficiles ; en second lieu, la création du Service Européen pour l'Action Extérieure (SEAE) et son évaluation intermédiaire ; en troisième lieu, les dernières années du mandat, qui ont vu Ashton se concentrer sur certains domaines d'action particuliers, parfois avec succès (Kosovo, Iran), parfois moins (Ukraine, PSDC) ; enfin, l'article reviendra sur la nature et le statut du poste même de HR/VP, avec la passation de pouvoir de la première récipiendaire à sa successeur. Cette fonction n'est-elle pas typiquement une « mission impossible » ?

Mots clés :

Union Européenne, Haut représentant de l'Union pour les affaires étrangères et la politique de sécurité, Service Européen pour l'Action Extérieure

Introduction

Is it even possible to write an objective, scholarly assessment of Catherine Ashton’s tenure as *High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy* and *Vice-President of the Commission* (HR-VP) between November 2009 and November 2014? In the early period of her appointment, she was mauled by a press-corps that more closely resembled a lynch mob. The vitriolic comment later subsided but never really went away, despite a number of significant diplomatic successes with which Ashton was associated – which I shall assess below. When she left office on 1 November 2014, there was virtually no valedictory comment in the European press, the media gaze being turned overwhelmingly on the personality of her successor, former Italian Foreign Minister Federica Mogherini¹. The British press did note her departure, but tended to focus almost exclusively on the GB£400,000 “golden handshake” she received from the EU as she left office². This article will attempt to produce a nuanced balance sheet by examining Ashton’s record under four headings. First: the circumstances of her appointment and the decidedly rocky start to her term of office. Second: the creation of the *European External Action Service* (EEAS) and its interim evaluation. Third: the later years, which saw her concentrate on a number of specific policy areas – to the neglect of others. Finally, I shall assess the nature and status of the HR-VP position itself as its first incumbent handed over to her successor. Is this particular job a case of “mission impossible”?

1. The Appointment of the High-Representative: misguided expectations?

The appointment, in November 2009, of Catherine Ashton as HR-VP was highly controversial. The circumstances have been analysed in depth elsewhere and there is little point in repeating that analysis here³. Some analysts had nevertheless believed that the position of HR-VP had been designed to foster

¹ One leading Brussels defence correspondent, Nicolas Gros-Verheyde, adorned his blog in the month before Ashton’s departure with a live clock ticking away the hours, minutes & seconds until she left office.

² Bruno Waterfield, “Baroness Ashton will be paid £400,000 by the EU to do nothing”, *Daily Telegraph*, 5 April 2013

³ Barber, Tony (2010), “The Appointments of Herman van Rompuy and Catherine Ashton”, *Journal of Common Market Studies Annual Review 2010*, pp.55-67; Howorth, Jolyon (2011), “The ‘new faces’ of Lisbon: assessing the performance of Catherine Ashton and Herman van Rompuy on the global stage”, *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol.16/3, Summer; Rüger, Carolin (2011), “A Position under Construction: Future Prospects of the High Representative after the Treaty of Lisbon”, in Gisela Müller-Brandeck-Boquet, & Carolin Rüger (2011), *The High Representative for the EU Foreign and Security Policy – Review and Prospects*, Baden-Baden, Nomos

much-needed EU *leadership* from the heart of Brussels⁴. But the individual chosen was markedly lacking in any experience of international leadership and indeed in political stature. It was the *signal* conveyed by this appointment that was received with such bewilderment around the world. That signal – from the heads of state and government of the EU's then twenty-seven member states – appeared to amount to a message that the Union *per se* would not be setting any agendas or taking any initiatives on the world stage. There would be no new telephone number for Henry Kissinger – or for Barack Obama. The German press even invented a word for the phenomenon, *Selbstverzwergung*, indicating the determination to remain a dwarf⁵. EU foreign and security policy, the message appeared to read, would stay firmly in the hands of the member states.

What, therefore, was the “High Representative” expected to do? The Consolidated Version of the Lisbon Treaty (2012) refers to the position repeatedly:

Article 18 states that:

“The European Council, acting by a qualified majority, with the agreement of the President of the Commission, shall appoint the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The European Council may end his term of office by the same procedure.

The High Representative shall conduct the Union's common foreign and security policy. He shall contribute by his proposals to the development of that policy, which he shall carry out as mandated by the Council. The same shall apply to the common security and defence policy.

The High Representative shall preside over the Foreign Affairs Council.

The High Representative shall be one of the Vice-Presidents of the Commission. He shall ensure the consistency of the Union's external action. He shall be responsible within the Commission for responsibilities incumbent on it in external relations and for coordinating other aspects of the Union's external action.”

Article 27 states that:

“The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who shall chair the Foreign Affairs Council, shall contribute through his proposals to the development of the common foreign and security policy and shall ensure implementation of the decisions adopted by the European Council and the Council.

The High Representative shall represent the Union for matters relating to the common foreign and security policy. He shall conduct political dialogue with

⁴ Poidevin, Estelle (2010), *L'Union Européenne et la Politique Etrangère: Le Haut Représentant pour la Politique Etrangère et de Sécurité Commune: Moteur Réel ou Leadership par Procuration (1999-2009)* Paris, L'Harmattan

⁵ Graw, A (2009), “Europas Selbstverzwergung schockt die USA” *Die Welt*, 21 November 2009

third parties on the Union's behalf and shall express the Union's position in international organisations and at international conferences.

In fulfilling his mandate, the High Representative shall be assisted by a European External Action Service.”

This amounts to an enormously ambitious remit – in effect at least three senior positions in one. Yet, rather than attempt to identify the most qualified person, the member states introduced arcane criteria for the appointment, such as citizenship of a small state or a large state, a Northern state or a Southern state, right- or left-wing political affiliation, and even gender. Since the Presidency of the Commission had already gone to José Manuel Barroso (a right-of-centre male from a small Southern state), EU “logic” dictated that one of the two remaining top jobs had to go to a left-of-centre politician from a large Northern state – if possible a woman. In the months prior to the appointment, the names of many high profile politicians (male and female) were thrown into the ring, including a clutch of former prime ministers and presidents. All of these individuals were considered to be serious players on the international stage, internationally well-known and respected foreign policy heavyweights with considerable leadership potential. Instead, the EU chose Catherine Ashton.

It would be wrong to conclude that those involved in the appointments procedure (the Heads of State or Government convening as the European Council) held the position in low regard. The European Council had, for the better part of a decade, believed that the appointment was both politically essential and institutionally unavoidable. Nor should it be concluded that the Ashton appointment reflected nervousness or reluctance on the part of Europe's leaders to appoint heavyweights to key positions. It has been argued that: “the Heads of State and Government *wanted* exactly her” since she fit the criteria and could be “kept on a short leash”⁶. That is too cynical a view. After all, most Presidents of the European Commission (an agency viewed with suspicion by many European leaders) have been major high profile political actors. The 1999 appointee to the original High Representative position, Javier Solana, had been Spanish foreign minister and Secretary General of NATO. Although Solana's legacy is still to be written, most observers concluded that he performed remarkably well within the political constraints of the position⁷, although one analyst insists that, despite his physical energy, personal charm, political astuteness and strategic creativity, Javier Solana never succeeded in becoming a genuine motor, a *leader* of European foreign and security policy⁸.

⁶ Ruger, op.cit. p. 218

⁷ Müller-Brandeck-Boquet, Gisela & Carolin Rüger (2011a), “The Legacy of Javier Solana, the High Representative 2.0 and the European External Action Service: strong foundations for the EU's international role?”, in Müller-Brandeck-Boquet, Gisela & Carolin Rüger (2011), *The High Representative for the EU Foreign and Security Policy – Review and Prospects*, Baden-Baden, Nomos; Kurowska, Xymena (2009), “ ‘Solana Milieu’: Framing Security Policy”, *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, 10/4, 523-540

⁸ Poidevin, op.cit. p. 188

In the case of the Ashton appointment, it has to be concluded that it was essentially something of an accident, resulting from a media management crisis confronting the UK prime minister. Gordon Brown had initially hoped he could deliver the Presidency of the Council appointment for Tony Blair, or at least secure the post of Commissioner for the Internal Market. But he failed on both counts. With the connivance of fellow “big state” leaders Merkel and Sarkozy, Brown agreed to try to find a British candidate for the HR-VP job. But all his credible candidates proved to be either uninterested (David Miliband, Geoffrey Hoon, John Hutton) or unacceptable to both Paris and Berlin (Peter Mandelson). On the very eve of the “appointments summit” in November 2009, it seemed that the UK would leave the meeting with empty hands – a political disaster for the beleaguered Brown. In the event, it was José Manuel Barroso who suggested Ashton. Did she not meet all the criteria – a left-of-centre female from a large Northern state? That she was unknown was less important than the fact that Brown could claim a minor triumph and that Barroso would wind up with a colleague as Vice President of the Commission who, to put it diplomatically, would be unlikely to cause him sleepless nights. Thus was the appointment sealed – and nobody was more surprised than Catherine Ashton herself⁹.

It is undeniable that Ashton got off to a bad start. First, there was her decision to reject a number of specialised foreign and security policy advisers for her private office (*cabinet*) in favour of the transfer of most staff from her previous office as Trade Commissioner. Given her want of experience in foreign and security policy, this decision bespoke both lack of self-confidence and lack of judgment. Second, two hastily prepared (and poorly executed) hearings before the European Parliament, made it abundantly clear that she was starting from scratch¹⁰. Then came the mid-January 2010 Haiti earthquake when she courted controversy by spending the weekend with her young family in London rather than either manning the office in Brussels or flying to Haiti (as Hillary Clinton had done). It cut little ice with her critics when she argued that since she was neither a doctor nor a fireman her presence in Haiti would have been superfluous. In late February 2010, Ashton made another contested diary decision, travelling to Moscow and Kiev to celebrate the election of Victor Yanukovitch as President of Ukraine (with hindsight, an ill-fated priority) rather than attending the first meeting under the new Lisbon rules of the Council of Defence Ministers in Majorca. This decision broke radically with Javier Solana’s practice of regarding these meetings as a sacrosanct diary priority. This incident turned out to be an early signal of what was to become Ashton’s general disregard for the EU’s *Common Security and Defence Policy* (CSDP), an issue to which I shall return. Ashton’s first 100 days were a wretched experience, marked by gratuitous attacks, bitter criticism of her inexperience, jibes at her alleged ill-judged priorities, regrets about her absences from significant meetings, snide comments about her lack of foreign

⁹ Charlemagne [David Rennie] (2009), “Why Europe Ended Up with High Rep Ashton”, *The Economist-Charlemagne’s Notebook*, 26 November

¹⁰ Toby Vogel, “Ashton gives underwhelming performance”, *European Voice*, 11 January 2010

language skills, sniping about her life-style, and accusations of excessively British/Atlanticist instincts¹¹. The situation became so serious that European foreign ministers, concerned that the strategic task of creating the External Action Service was being compromised, rallied to her defence in early March 2010¹². She herself went on the counter-attack at the same time, accusing her critics of hobbling the embryonic EEAS¹³. It was to the task of launching this Service that she devoted the greater part of her first year in office.

2. Ashton’s “Crown Jewel”: The European External Action Service

The Treaty of Lisbon has relatively little to say about the EEAS. Article 27 (3) states:

“In fulfilling his mandate, the High Representative shall be assisted by a European External Action Service. This service shall work in cooperation with the diplomatic services of the Member States and shall comprise officials from relevant departments of the General Secretariat of the Council and of the Commission as well as staff seconded from national diplomatic services of the Member States. The organisation and functioning of the European External Action Service shall be established by a decision of the Council. The Council shall act on a proposal from the High Representative after consulting the European Parliament and after obtaining the consent of the Commission.”

The launch of the Service was Catherine Ashton’s first and major priority. In this, she had to do battle with the European Parliament, with the European Commission, with the member states and with the media. On 18 March 2010, two heavyweight MEPs, Elmar Brok and Guy Verhofstadt, generated a “non-paper” arguing that the Service should be an agency of the European Commission, that the European Parliament should have oversight of the service’s budget, personnel, aid policy and ratification procedures, and that there should be public parliamentary hearings for the top positions. One week later, Ashton issued her radically alternative counter-proposal: that the EEAS should be an autonomous agency reporting directly to the HR-VP, that it should be equally answerable to the Council, the Commission and the member states, and that it should have a pyramidal hierarchy headed by a powerful Secretary General. There then ensued a battle royal between the two sides, the MEPs

¹¹ Ian Traynor, “Lady Ashton endures baptism of fire as Europe’s first foreign policy chief”, *The Guardian* 1 March 2010; Maria Ramirez, “Todos contra Ashton”, *El Mundo*, 4 March 2010; Jean Quatremer, “Bras de fer autour de la diplomatie européenne”, *Libération* 26 février 2010

¹² David Brunnstrom & Justyna Pamlak, “EU Ministers speak up for foreign affairs chief”, *Reuters*, 5 March 2010; “EU Foreign ministers in show of support for Ashton”, *Google hosted news*, 8 March 2010

¹³ David Charter, “Baroness Ashton appeals for an end to personal attacks”, *Times On-Line*, 10 March 2010; Ian Traynor, “Lady Ashton launches fight-back against critics ahead of key talks on EU foreign policy”, *the Guardian*, 4 March 2010; Charlemagne [David Rennie], “Lady Ashton prepares a showdown with her critics”, *The Economist – Charlemagne’s notebook* 4 March 2010; Tony Barber, “Ashton hits back at her critics”, *Financial Times*, 10 March 2010

threatening to veto the entire project unless she made concessions to their approach. On 26 April 2010, she won the unanimous support of the *Foreign Affairs Council*. The stand off with the European Parliament was eventually resolved in bilateral discussions and a compromise adopted in mid-June 2010. The compromise revolved around three main issues. First, the EEAS, as Ashton had proposed, became an autonomous body (not an agency of the Commission), but it is supposed to work “in close coordination” with the Commission. Secondly, the power structure was relaxed through the appointment of several hierarchically equal Directors General. Thirdly, where the MEPs wanted Senate-style powers to vet top jobs, they had to settle for closed-door hearings with no veto. The very fact of establishing this Service within one year, and seeing off the rival claims of the Commission and the Parliament was no mean accomplishment and must be credited primarily to Ashton's perseverance and bargaining skills – although it must also be recognised that, in this policy area, she enjoyed the full backing of the member states, a crucial component in any victory in today's EU institutional maze¹⁴.

The Service opened with little fanfare on 1 December 2010, its staff being progressively centralized in the newly constructed Triangle Building, mid way between the Council and the Commission buildings at Rond Point Schuman. The first round of personnel were roughly drawn in equal thirds from the Council Secretariat, the Commission and the member states. The EEAS is intended to act as a unified diplomatic corps for the EU, in the service of both CFSP and CSDP. It comprises around 2,000 staff and 140 Delegations around the world. A glance at the Service's organigram suggests that it has developed into an immensely complex organization¹⁵. Formally headed directly by the HR-VP, it has two senior executive positions, an Executive Secretary General, and a Chief Operating Officer. Initially intended to reflect a division of labour between “external” and “internal” responsibilities, these two positions are expected to merge under the new HR-VP Federica Mogherini. Below them are two deputy secretaries general, one dealing with policy and one with inter-institutional issues. These five top post-holders constitute the Corporate Board. There are then seven managing directors, five of them geographic (covering Asia/Pacific, Africa, Europe and Central Asia, North Africa and the Middle East, and the Americas – North and South) and two of them functional (Administration and Finance, Global and Multilateral Issues). There are separate structures covering security policy and CSDP, and another dealing with political affairs. The organigram also claims responsibility for four somewhat autonomous agencies,

¹⁴ Antonio Missiroli, “The EU Foreign Service Under Construction”, European University Institute, Florence, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, *Policy Paper* 2010/04; David Hannay, “Benchmarking the EU's new diplomatic service”, *Europe's World*, 21 January 2011; Ingeborg Graesli MEP, “The Creation of the European External Action Service: a critical analysis”, *Fondation Robert Schuman* 14 February 2011; Keukeleire, Stephan, Michael Smith & Sophie Vanhoonaker (2011), *The Emerging EU System of Diplomacy: How Fit for Purpose?* Loughborough, *DSEU Policy Paper* No.1, March.

¹⁵ See the current structure at: http://eeas.europa.eu/background/docs/organisation_en.pdf

the *Satellite Centre*, the *Defence Agency*, the *Institute for Security Studies* and the *Security and Defence College*, although these are not strictly part of the Service, but do report directly to the HR-VP. Less than a year after its launch, the EEAS was mired in controversy amidst reports of poor morale, chaotic lack of coordination and a steady haemorrhage of disillusioned staff¹⁶. In 2013, the EEAS was subjected to considerable external scrutiny in anticipation of its mandatory internal review. Catherine Ashton took credit for its creation, and must be judged to some extent on its overall record, but she cannot be held responsible for every aspect of its subsequent evolution. Opinion is deeply divided as to its effectiveness.

The “crown jewels” of the Service are the 140 worldwide Delegations, which took over from the previous Commission representations¹⁷. These are progressively being upgraded to formal embassy status and their heads enjoy full ambassadorial rank. These envoys consider themselves as the representatives not only of both the Council and the Commission, but also of the member states. While it is likely that a number of the smaller EU member states will progressively merge their own embassies into the EU Delegations, this will not happen in the case of the larger member states with extensive diplomatic presence abroad¹⁸. This poses immediately the major issue confronting the EEAS: its relationship to the foreign ministries (MFAs) of the member states – particularly the large ones. How is the Service expected to cope with what some have seen as contradictory mandates? On the one hand, it is expected to coordinate the diplomatic activities of the member states, to generate new – collective – ideas and approaches, indeed to exercise some measure of diplomatic leadership. Yet on the other hand, it must not “step on the toes of national diplomacies, or interfere with national priorities and interests”¹⁹. In the run-up to the EEAS's own internal review in 2013, several think tanks produced their own suggestions for the Service going forward. The *European Policy Centre* and the *Finnish Institute of International Affairs* focused strongly in their joint recommendations on the challenge of relations between the EEAS and the member state MFAs. They formulated a large number of eminently practical proposals to generate synergies (rather than conflict) between the two²⁰. These proposals were entirely sensible but they underscored the fundamental challenge facing the EEAS: if it is to be

¹⁶ Andrew Rettman, “Staff leaving EU Diplomatic Service amid bad working conditions”, *EU Observer*, 30 septembre 2011. Ashton's Spokesperson rebutted these claims as “unsubstantiated tittle-tattle”, *EU Observer*, 3 October 2011, but my own interviews in Brussels at the time confirmed that there were serious human resource problems within the Service.

¹⁷ Balfour, Rosa & Kristi Raik (2013), *Equipping the European Union for the 21st Century: National Diplomacies, the European External Action Service and the making of EU foreign policy*, Brussels & Helsinki, FIIA & EPC

¹⁸ Comelli, Michele & Raffaello Matarazzo (2011), “Rehashed Commission Delegations or Real Embassies? EU Delegations post-Lisbon”, Rome, IAI Working Papers 11/23 July; Drieskens, Edith (2012), “What's in a name? Challenges to the Creation of EU Delegations”, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 7/1, 51-64

¹⁹ Balfour & Raik 2013, op.cit., p.13

²⁰ Balfour and Raik, op.cit., pp. 63-64

effective, it must be seen by the twenty-eight member states as a source of serious diplomatic added value. To date, the record here is very ambivalent. Indeed, as Tereza Novotna has reported, it appears that the member states are progressively taking over the Service. Instead of the 33.3% share of positions intended for national capitals, by 2014, EU Member States occupied 17 of 34 posts at senior management level, while holding 12 (out of 21) top management positions. At the same time, the proportion of EU Delegations headed by national diplomats increased from 8.3% in 2010 to 61.2% in September 2014, whereas the EU Delegations headed by EU institution officials decreased from a peak of 91.7% in 2010 to 38.8% in September 2014". The member states, it seems, are already winning the battle for control of what was intended to be a European institution²¹.

In 2013, the *Royal Institute of International Affairs* in London set out its own critical proposals for the EEAS. The authors of the RIIA report concluded that the Service faced three major challenges: "a strategy challenge, a leadership challenge and a delivery challenge"²². These are fundamental issues. In her paper for the crucial extraordinary meeting of the European Council in December 2013, Ashton argued that: "Europe faces rising security challenges within a changing strategic context [and these] developments warrant a strategic debate among Heads of State and Government", but the priorities she then listed as "strategic" were not priorities at all but a simple list of the main challenges faced by CSDP. The EEAS's own mid-term Review in July 2013 fails completely to set out any discernible strategic perspective. On leadership, another area where most commentators see a need for massive improvement, the Chatham House report called for "intellectual leadership, a sense of risk-taking and creative foreign-policy execution". These "proposals" have to be read as interim verdicts on the performance of the EEAS leadership, at the head of which sat Catherine Ashton. Similar criticisms were forthcoming from the papers issued by the *Centre for European Policy Studies*²³ and the *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. The Carnegie analyst Stefan Lehne's measured but wide-ranging criticism of the EEAS was all the more devastating coming from a soft-spoken former Austrian diplomat with a strong sense of nuance. Focusing on the fact that the Commission retained control of policy areas such as Enlargement and Development, and noting that Ashton was largely absent from meetings of the former RELEX Commissioners, he concluded that: "the post-Lisbon arrangements actually represent a step backward. The gap between foreign policy in a narrow sense and Community competences has thus widened. The EU finds it even more difficult than before to integrate the various components

²¹ Tereza Novotna, "Who's in charge? Member States, EU Institutions and the European External Action Service", Milan, ISPI Policy Brief no. 228, October 2014

²² Hemra, Staffan, Thomas Raines & Richard Whitman (2011), *A Diplomatic Entrepreneur: Making the Most of the European External Action Service*, London, Chatham House

²³ Helwig, Niklas, Paul Ivan & Hrant Kostanyan (2013), *The New EU Foreign Policy Architecture: Reviewing the first two years of the EEAS*, Brussels, CEPS

into an integrated strategy²⁴. These conclusions were echoed by the European Court of Auditors in a highly critical report on 30 June 2014²⁵. The auditors found that the establishment of the EEAS had been “rushed and inadequately prepared”, that there were “ineffective cooperation mechanisms at top level and a rigid financial and administrative framework at the delegations”, as well as “weaknesses in the prioritisation, organisation and allocation of resources”. Even allowing for the teething problems inevitably associated with the launch of a complex new institution, the interim verdicts were harsh.

In July 2013, the EEAS issued its own internal mid-term review, as had been required on its establishment²⁶. The (18 page) Review is long on process and very short on substance. It contains virtually nothing about strategic objectives. It is silent about the Service’s own *raison d’être* or ambition. It says very little about its interaction with its international partners and all too little about the key issue of relations with the member states. By repeatedly insisting that most relationships with the other Brussels-based institutions, particularly the Commission, are “working well”, it might be accused of disingenuousness. Most analysts consider that relations between the Service and the Commission are dreadful, with each seeking to grab outposts of the other’s empire. The lion’s share of the Review consists of a series of sections detailing relations with the other institutions (Commission, Council, Parliament), each of which is a study in understatement. A series of 26 short-term recommendations and 9 medium-term recommendations revolve almost exclusively around the *internal* working of the Service – to such an extent that one is led to wonder about the very *externality* of the service. Some proposals pushed by the European Parliament (rationalization and reduction of top appointments, and the reform of financial procedures), are taken on board²⁷. But the main thrust of the EP’s critique – which also focused on the need for strategy and which made very concrete proposals for CSDP – was simply ignored. In a two page personal introduction to the Review, Ashton struck a resigned note in observing that “the absence of political will or of agreement among the member states [sets] limits to what the service can deliver”. Much comment on the Review, which one senior diplomat was quoted as being “very much Cathy’s personal document”²⁸, stressed her obvious reluctance to continue tilting at member state windmills. In effect, she appeared to have abandoned

²⁴ Lehne, Stefan (2011), “More Action, Better Service: How To Strengthen the European External Action Service”, Brussels, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 16, p.9

²⁵ http://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR14_11/SR14_11_EN.pdf.

²⁶ [EEAS] (2013), *EEAS Review*, Brussels: http://eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/2013/29072013_eeas_review_en.htm

²⁷ Brok, Elmar & Roberto Galtieri (2013), *Draft Report for a European Parliament Recommendation [...] on the 2013 Review of the organization and the functioning of the EEAS*, Europea Parliament (2012/2253 INI), 25 March

²⁸ Norman, Laurence (2013), “EU’s Foreign Service Proposes Fix in Review”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 July

most of the constructive “big ideas” which had been put forward by those offering suggestions for the improvement of the Service²⁹.

Academic analysts have highlighted the lack of foundational principles behind the EEAS’s awkward positioning mid-way between – but independent from – both the Commission and the Council³⁰. One scholar portrays it as an “interstitial organization” which inevitably results in conflicting principles and practices, effectively ruling out coherence³¹. This may be so, and it certainly helps explain the Service’s incestuous internal gaze when evaluating its role. Yet the challenge for the EEAS under Federica Mogherini will be not so much to find internal adjustments to improve coordination and coherence, but to ensure that the rest of the world pays attention. Rosa Balfour raised this question frontally in a survey of expert opinion on the EEAS: “What difference does improved EU foreign policy make?”³². The inability of the EU as an entity to formulate any discernible policy on issues as crucial in 2013/14 as Syria, Russia, Egypt and the Middle East Peace Process³³ is a measure not so much of its lack of coherence on the world stage but of its effective lack of existence. One academic analysis concluded that the very idea of finding a “single voice” for EU external policy is “an unhelpful myth” and should be abandoned³⁴. *The Economist*, not known for pulling its punches on controversial issues, nevertheless cut to the quick when its Brussels correspondent, Anton La Guardia, wrote: “The EEAS is simply irrelevant. I have stopped reading the endless statements that the service puts out. I had breakfast this morning with a former American diplomat and I asked him what Washington was saying about the EEAS: ‘Nothing’, he replied”³⁵. That is not attributable to Ashton, but if the institution is to have any future at all, that will have to change.

3. Ashton’s Main Policy Priorities – and non-priorities

Ashton’s first major overseas visit was to the Middle East, and she spent more time on that region in general than on any other issue. Before leaving for her visit to Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Gaza in mid-March 2010, Ashton struck an unfamiliar note in EU diplomacy, arguing that the Union could leverage its trade ties with Israel and make maximum use of Israel’s known desire for closer cooperation with the EU in many fields. In other words, the EU could attempt to

²⁹ Rettman, Andrew (2013), “Ashton drops big ideas on EU foreign affairs”, *EUObserver* 13 June

³⁰ Hadfield, Amelia & Daniel Fiott (2013), “Europe and the Rest of the World”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 51/Annual Review, 168-182

³¹ Batora, Jozef (2013), “The ‘Mitrailleuse Effect’: The EEAS as an Interstitial Organization and the Dynamics of Innovation in Diplomacy”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 51/4, 598-613

³² Dempsey, Judy (2013), “Judy asks: has EU Foreign Policy Improved in 2013?”, Brussels, Carnegie Europe, July 17

³³ Witney, Nick (2013), *Europe and the Vanishing Two-State Solution*, London, European Council on Foreign Affairs

³⁴ Stéphanie Novak, “Single Representative, Single Voice, Magical Thinking and the Representation of the EU on the World Stage”, *Global Policy* (2014)

³⁵ Charlemagne, [Anton La Guardia] (2012), “The Berlusconi Option for Lady Ashton?”, *The Economist*, February 2.

put pressure on Israel, both regarding the settlements and in terms of the resumption of direct peace negotiations with the Palestinians³⁶. This was tough talk. It was reinforced by a decision to prioritise a visit to Gaza, on the pretext of seeing at first hand how the EU's aid money was being spent³⁷. Coming at a time when the US administration's approach to the Middle East problem had run into the sand, the EU visit could have generated a lucid and balanced assessment of responsibilities for the impasse and some clear proposals for transcending it. This was not the case. Cautiously eschewing any speeches or even statements on the situation, Ashton contented herself with an op-ed in the *New York Times* assuring the US of EU support for American efforts to re-launch negotiations and calling for the "re-energising" of The Quartet (the body the Arab League refers to as "the quartet *sans trois*")³⁸.

In 2011-2012, Ashton stepped up her involvement in the Middle East Peace Process, for three main reasons. The first was because the ripple effect from the Arab Spring seemed to offer a propitious moment to exercise whatever leverage the EU could muster. The second was because the Palestinian Authority, in September 2011, was determined to take its case for statehood to the United Nations and it was believed in Brussels that Ashton, through a process of shuttle diplomacy between Benjamin Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas, might just be able to defuse the situation (one that threatened to tear the EU member states apart). The third reason was that Barack Obama had, by this time, given up trying to pressurise Israel on the settlements, and Tony Blair's role as international intermediary had stalled. In 2012 alone, there were three European Council Conclusions on the Middle East, seven statements by or on behalf of Ashton deploring Israeli settlement activity; and visits to Israel by Jose Manuel Barroso, Ashton (twice), and the 27 ambassadors of the Political and Security Committee³⁹. Ashton took up with determination and no little courage the cause of verifying the true source of Israeli products in order rigorously to implement EU laws prohibiting trade with the occupied territories. She was supported by a number of EU foreign ministries, but silently ignored by others. Illegal "Israeli" products continued to enter the EU. Abbas went ahead with his bid for UN recognition. Netanyahu continued (and still continues) to build settlements. During my visit to Israel in 2011, a leading public intellectual assured me that Ashton's statements were simply ignored in Jerusalem, while in Ramallah she was suspected of being the mouthpiece of Tony Blair. On 19 March 2012, she provoked a firestorm during a speech in Brussels by referring in the same sentence to the murdered Jewish victims of the Toulouse attacks and civilian victims of the war in Gaza. Major Jewish organisations, in Israel, France and the

³⁶ Luke Baker, "EU has leverage with Israel on talks – Ashton", *Reuters*, 13 March 2010; Honor Mahoney, "Ashton to push for resumption of Israel-Palestine peace talks", *European Voice* 13 March 2010

³⁷ Andrew Rettman, "EU visit to Gaza is 'poke in the eye' for Israel", *European Voice*, 9 March 2010.

³⁸ Catherine Ashton, "Lessons from a Gaza trip", *New York Times* 22 March 2010

³⁹ Witney, Nick (2013), *Europe and the Vanishing Two-State Solution*, London, European Council on Foreign Affairs, p.13

US, clamoured for her resignation⁴⁰. Trying to make peace between Israel and the Palestinians is a thankless task, as many a US president and Secretary of State will testify. There is little evidence that Catherine Ashton, as the EU's main agent in that sad process, made any difference.

Much the same must be said of her role during the Arab Spring. The EU was totally unprepared for the uprisings across the Middle East in December 2010 and early 2011. Unfortunately for Ashton, in her capacity as HR-VP, she was caught in the middle of the chaotic responses forthcoming from the various member states and proved incapable of leading an orchestra that was already playing in cacophonous disharmony. Statements emanating from Van Rompuy's office, from the President of the European Parliament, a joint statement from Cameron, Merkel and Sarkozy, notes from different political groupings within the EP, not to mention from different European capitals, all undercut the statement eventually issued by Ashton herself. In a situation where the French foreign minister Michelle Alliot-Marie had offered President Ben-Ali French riot police to deal with his crowd problems⁴¹, and in which prime minister Silvio Berlusconi and his foreign minister Franco Frattini were issuing statements supportive of Mubarak, what hope did Ashton have of drafting a "common" EU statement? In the event, the somewhat anodyne draft she eventually generated provoked the ire of Britain's David Cameron who publicly reprimanded her on the eve of a European summit for the lack of "clear and strong language to show Egypt there would be consequences unless the repression stopped"⁴². The HR-VP's cause was not assisted when the interim Egyptian government in mid-February announced that they were too busy to receive her⁴³. She was then upstaged by the UK Prime Minister, who became the first leader to meet the new Egyptian government – on 21 February 2011⁴⁴.

There are, however, two main areas of policy where analysts agree that she did make a real difference. The first is in the Balkans and the second in Iran. On 19 October 2012, Ashton hosted the first of ten meetings between Hashim Thaci, prime minister of Kosovo, and Ivica Dacic, prime minister of Serbia, neither of whom had previously met the other. Six months later, after marathon rounds of diplomacy, the two leaders signed a formal agreement providing the basis for normalised relations between their respective countries⁴⁵. There is no doubt that

⁴⁰ J.J. Goldberg, "Ashton's False Equivalence that Wasn't", *Forward*, March 22, 2012; Jennifer Hanin, "Catherine Ashton deserves a Helen Thomas Retirement", *Act For Israel*, March 20, 2012

⁴¹ Kim Willsher, "France rocked by news of aid to Tunisia and Egypt", *LA Times*, 5 February 2011

⁴² Bruno Waterfield, "Egypt Crisis: David Cameron reprimands Baroness Ashton at EU Summit", *The Telegraph* 4 February 2011

⁴³ "Don't visit us for the moment, Egypt tells EU's Ashton" *M&G News*, 9 February 2011; "EU's Ashton eyes Egypt trip despite opposition", *Reuters*, 9 February 2011

⁴⁴ Nicolas Gros-Verheyde, "La 'course du Caire', nouveau jeu européen. Ou comment griller la politesse à Lady Ashton », *Bruxelles2*, 21 February 2011

⁴⁵ The EEAS announcement of the details at: http://eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/2013/190413_eu-facilitated_dialogue_en.htm. See also Don Melvin, "Serbia, Kosovo reach tentative deal on relations", *The Guardian*, 20 April 2013

the HR-VP, who attaches considerable importance to the personal touch in diplomacy, should take much credit for this achievement. The ten-round political negotiations followed over a year of patient footwork by Ashton's principal foreign policy advisor Robert Cooper, who succeeded in forging agreement on a number of more technical issues such as trade, university degrees, civil registries and border management, all of which depended for their implementation on the overall political agreement. The details of that agreement are complex and sensitive but basically amount to Serbia having ceded its claim to legal authority over the whole of Kosovo in exchange for a significant degree of Serb autonomy over four Serb-dominated areas in the North of the province⁴⁶. The breakthrough was all the more significant in that Dacic was initially a disciple of Slobodan Milosevic, while Thaci was a fighter in the Kosovo Liberation Army.

There is no question that Ashton's determined personal involvement in the talks, over which she enjoyed a degree of political leverage that was not available to her in the parallel Iran negotiations (see below), was critical. The gulf between the parties was not being closed until she stepped in. The deal does not amount to formal Serb recognition of Kosovo, but it is a major step towards EU membership for both states. Hard-liners in both countries are determined to wreck the deal and there is still a long way to go before lasting peace breaks out. But the agreement is a landmark achievement and Ashton fully deserves the plaudits that accompanied it. The detailed technical groundwork was carried out by Cooper, but the political deal was clinched by Ashton. The historical context was favourable. Serbia had nowhere to go but towards EU membership and even Dacic knew that. Kosovo is still not recognised by five EU member states Spain, Slovakia, Romania, Greece and Cyprus, but several of them had indicated that they would consider recognition in return for Pristina's signing of the deal (although since the agreement was signed no EU member state has yet moved to recognise Kosovo). On the occasion of her leaving the post of HR-VP, Ashton invited Dacic and Thaci back to her EEAS office for a celebration. She was entitled to do so.

The other policy area where Ashton is credited with having made a difference is in the P5+1 (or P3+3) talks with Iran⁴⁷. Here, the plaudits have been as generous as the criticism was harsh on other issues. After the much discussed diplomatic agreement in Geneva on 24 November 2013, the European editor of *The Guardian*, Ian Traynor (not one given to hyperbole), enthused: "The former Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament activist has brokered what looks like the biggest nuclear de-escalation of an era, the diplomatic breakthrough of the decade, a problem and a dispute so intractable it could have led to a devastating

⁴⁶ Frances Trix, "Serbia and Kosovo: a European Success Story", *Informed Comment*, 27 April 2013

⁴⁷ P5+1 is the formula for the UN Security Council permanent five plus Germany; P3+3 is the EU formula for UK, France and Germany, plus the US, Russia and China. It is the same group.

war engulfing the entire Middle East and beyond"⁴⁸. *Le Monde*, whose journalists had savaged Ashton repeatedly in the past, even went so far as to credit her with "strategic vision"⁴⁹. The Iranian negotiations are still in play as I write these lines and it is not certain that the agreement brokered in November 2013 will lead to a final resolution of the Iranian nuclear crisis. The "final deal" was supposed to have been concluded in November 2014, but the timetable slipped and a further extension was agreed. It is highly significant therefore, that Ashton's successor as HR-VP, Federica Mogherini, persuaded her to continue as the EU's representative to the talks. Indeed, there was a consensus among all those involved, from US Secretary of State John Kerry to the urbane and sophisticated Iranian chief negotiator, foreign minister Javad Zarif, that her continued presence was essential to any successful outcome. Like the negotiations with the Serbian and Kosovar prime ministers, Ashton has succeeded, through sheer force of personality, in becoming very close to all the key players (particularly but not exclusively the Iranians), in winning their confidence and in making herself indispensable to the process. This had also been the case with the previous chief negotiator, the aloof and prickly Saïd Jalili, who was as different from Zarif as chalk from cheese. It was, officials close to the talks insist, Ashton who succeeded, even with Jalili (who seemed to be trying his hardest to avoid a deal), in keeping the conversation going, even when almost everybody else was ready to throw in the towel.

What is her secret? The West's Iranian negotiation stance is tightly scripted in Washington DC and Ashton's diplomatic margin of manoeuvre is extremely limited. That is not her strong suit. Indeed, the bases of the November 2013 "agreement" were thrashed out in secret bilateral talks between the US and Iran, to which Ashton was not a party, although she was apprised of their substance. On the contrary, it is her personalised approach that delivers results. She pays close attention to the sartorial dimension, taking care to dress in a way that makes her interlocutors comfortable. She favours long, three-hour dinners on the eve of diplomatic sessions, where she peppers her Iranian counterparts with questions about their children and grandchildren. She plays Scheherazade, winning over her king with empathy and a thousand stories. Two experts who have followed the talks closely even suggest that her background as a working-class anti-nuclear activist gives her a measure of credibility: she is not "just another" Western diplomat oozing double standards, defending the West's right to nuclear weapons and sanctioning those it accuses of planning to acquire them⁵⁰. Above all perhaps, as was the case over Kosovo, Ashton has revealed extraordinary reserves of patience and stamina, sitting through interminable

⁴⁸ Ian Traynor, "Lady Ashton's Geneva triumph takes centre stage", *The Guardian* 24 November 2013;

⁴⁹ Jean-Pierre Stroobants et alii, "Catherine Ashton, le triomphe discret de l'autre 'Mme Europe'", *Le Monde*, 4 décembre 2013

⁵⁰ Laura Rozen and Barbara Slavin, "Can Western Women Tame Iran's Nuclear Negotiators?", *Al-Monitor*, 8 February 2013: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/can-western-women-tamebr-irans-n.html#>

rounds of essentially tedious technical talks that seemed to be going round in circles, but never being prepared to give up hope. Another asset, somewhat paradoxically, has been her aversion to the media. This ensured that, over the Iran negotiations, she was able to remain absolutely silent in public. Those close to the talks also highlight the key background role of another woman, the EEAS deputy secretary general Helga Schmid, who has also been retained in Brussels beyond her term in order to continue with the current, extended round of negotiations with Iran.⁵¹

If Kosovo and Iran must be chalked up on the highly positive side of the balance sheet, other policy areas must be allocated to the negative side. The EU's *Common Security and Defence Policy* (CSDP), of which she was notionally head, was relatively neglected during her tenure. She rarely attended the meetings of the defence ministers, was reluctant to launch new CSDP missions (none was initiated between 2009 and 2012), seemed to be more comfortable in the company of NATO secretaries general than in those of EU defence leaders and considered the EU as a military actor to be something of a bad idea. Ashton defined her diplomatic function as being "to promote the role of the EU as a soft power in the world". In a speech in Budapest in February 2011, she stressed that the EU "cannot deploy gunboats or bombers" and argued that its strength "lies, paradoxically in its inability to throw its weight around"⁵². The speech was interpreted by one analyst as a deliberate attempt "to usurp the work of her predecessor, who sought for over a decade to carefully build up the European Union's credibility and authority as a 'global power'"⁵³. On CSDP, she was widely suspected in Brussels of simply obeying orders from London. One French analyst coined the term "Ashtonisation" to characterize a European defence policy that had been defanged and rendered essentially inactive⁵⁴.

Another policy issue on which she failed manifestly to improve matters was the Ukraine crisis. Negotiations with Ukraine had been handled, not by the EEAS or the Council, but by the European Commission, under the leadership of Commissioner for Enlargement and the Neighborhood Štefan Füle. In general, the Commission can be faulted for engaging in negotiations with Kiev without any sense of the broader political context or stakes. In particular, the EU failed to anticipate Russia's reaction to its overtures to Ukraine⁵⁵. There is no evidence that Ashton was particularly interested in the challenges thrown up by the EU's

⁵¹ These observations on Iran have benefited from my off-the-record discussions with several officials and experts who have followed the negotiations closely from the very outset.

⁵² Speech at Corvinus University, Budapest, 25 February 2011. <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=SPEECH/11/126>

⁵³ James Rogers, "The Sly Return of Civilian Power", European Geostrategy blog, 2 March 2011: <http://europeangeostrategy.ideasoneurope.eu/2011/03/02/the-sly-return-of-civilian-power/>

⁵⁴ Estelle Poidevin, "Politique étrangère, sécurité et défense: une Union Européenne en voie d'ashtonisation"?, *Le Monde*, 22 août 2011

⁵⁵ Neil MacFarlane and Anand Menon, "The EU & Ukraine", *Survival*, 56/3, June-July 2014

Eastern Partnership approach, although she apparently prized her personal relationship with President Yanukovitch. However, once the crisis began to get serious, as the Maidan protests escalated in the winter of 2013-2014, she briefly decided to immerse herself in the events. A number of high-profile visits to Kiev in saw her greeted rather like a rock-star in an Independence Square bedecked with EU flags (infuriating Vladimir Putin), while she also engaged in discussions with Yanukovitch. These visits seriously undercut the work being done by Füle and the Commission, and were uncoordinated with the parallel visit to the Ukrainian capital, on 20 February 2014, of the EU *member state troika* of Laurent Fabius, Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Radek Sikorski. In the event, after a moment of excitement about Ukraine, Ashton appears to have lost interest and withdrew from the fray. There are those who say that she would have done better to keep out⁵⁶. It was the cacophony emanating from Europe on this vital issue that led the US Undersecretary of State, Victoria Nuland, to utter her famous leaked expletive: “F**k the EU”.

Conclusion: The High Representative's Job: is it “mission impossible”?

Was the appointment of Catherine Ashton little other than a cynical backroom stitch-up between three or four European leaders who appeared not to consider the job as being of any particular importance? Was it an exercise in *Realpolitik* whose primary objective was to appoint somebody who would be readily subordinated to the power dictates of a handful of executives? Was it merely an experiment – to see how this post would pan out? Was it a mistake? “Euro-realist” commentators had a field day explaining to those who had hoped for more high-profile appointees that no single individual – however technically qualified or politically astute – could possibly have made any difference to the EU's position on the world stage since “no amount of institutional tinkering can circumvent the need for national governments to agree in order that policies be adopted”⁵⁷. Of course, the adoption of common foreign policy preferences requires agreement among the member states. But that agreement can be considerably facilitated by having in post, in Brussels, an individual of genuine stature, with a deep knowledge of the issues, possessed of strategic vision, who is able clearly to formulate the available options, and persuasively to indicate a way forward. The job description itself remained largely to be written by the incumbent. It is significant that the original 2004 title, emerging from the Constitutional Convention, had been *Union Minister for Foreign Affairs* and that this had been deliberately watered down (largely under British pressure) in the Lisbon Treaty text to *High Representative*. Everybody knows what the word Minister means, even if the notion of a “Union Minister” was an innovation. But nobody was (or is) quite sure what a High Representative is supposed to do. There was, from the outset, no matter who the incumbent was, a choice to be

⁵⁶ Peter Lavelle, “The EU's Ukraine policy: a moral bankruptcy” *The Guardian (Sydney)* No.1630, 12 March 2014

⁵⁷ Menon, Anand (2009), “Limited Ambition”, *Global Europe*, 14 December

made, between, on the one hand, a secretary and on the other hand a general, between a follower and a leader, between reactive and proactive instincts, between a coordinator and a doer, between a tactician and a strategist.

The big question raised by Ashton's tenure is not so much that of discovering why she was relatively ineffective, but that of deciding whether the job is in fact doable. Unlike, for example, the US Secretary of State (to which position that of HR-VP is often compared), there are major problems with the EU post. The HR-VP is not working "for" or "with" a powerful executive President, so there is no clear political programme or direction to follow. Moreover, the member states (and particularly the large and powerful ones) have little intention of letting the HR-VP assume an *automatic* lead on policy issues, particularly sensitive ones. So s/he is unlikely to be allowed to create her/his own political direction, especially if it is proactive and robust. This structural reality was compounded in Ashton's case by inexperience in the field of diplomacy and security. The record during the Arab Spring was extremely telling. Ashton hesitated to draft any statement until she had cleared it with all 27 foreign ministers. In the words of the *Economist* "is this admirable respect for smaller member states or worrying timidity?"⁵⁸.

This inability to exercise leadership is not an absolute impossibility in the HR-VP position. Most EU member states have no problem with the notion that somebody needs to steer the ship. During her confirmation hearings, Ashton told the European Parliament that she saw herself as a "facilitator rather than a doer". "Her vision", remarked one EU diplomat, "is inferior to the mandate she was given". Franziska Brantner, of the German Green Party, echoed this sentiment by insisting that "Mrs Ashton does not have to wait for consensus among the 27. She could take her own initiatives, but she chooses not to"⁵⁹. There in fact, is the rub. The HR-VP post-holder is caught somewhere between a responsibility to coordinate and a responsibility to exercise some measure of leadership. A related problem with the position is precisely its "double-hatted" or even "triple-hatted" responsibilities. The objective of replacing the rotating presidency in foreign and security policy with a permanent position was laudable. The logic behind locating the position in both the Council and the Commission – in order to defuse turf battles and foster coherence – was commendable.

But in practice the incompatible physical demands of the post produce two problems. One is that it is literally impossible to discharge all the responsibilities that befall the post-holder. To be expected to attend meetings of the European Council, to chair the *Foreign Affairs Council*, to attend meetings of the College of

⁵⁸ Charlemagne, [David Rennie] (2011) "The Test for Ashton and Europe", *Economist-Charlemagne's Notebook*, 1 February

⁵⁹ EU Business (2011), "Europe under attack for 'soft' diplomacy", *EU Business*, 30 January 2011

Commissioners as well as special Commission meetings in the areas of Enlargement, Neighbourhood, Development and Humanitarian Assistance (all of which dossiers were denied the HR-VP by the machinations of the Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso), to chair the *European Defence Agency*, plus ad-hoc meetings of the EU defence ministers, as well as to run the EEAS and to represent the EU at summit meetings and other events around the world – all of this is wildly unrealistic. Ashton found herself very often expected to be in several places – indeed in several countries – at the same time. This left her vulnerable to criticism from all those venues she had to neglect. In 2013, she recalled “a very sad day when I went to five countries in one day and was still criticized for not going to the United States”⁶⁰. At the same time, this multiple institutional belonging does not, in fact, help foster coherence. Inter-agency competition is a fact of life in governmental and inter-governmental organisations and to place one individual directly in the firing line is hardly a wise move. It is a little like sending unarmed peacekeepers into a civil war zone where there is no peace to be kept. The fact of belonging to the Council and the Commission succeeded in making her enemies in both bodies, and this was exacerbated by the personal animosities between some of her advisers and senior officials in both the Council and the Commission. On her appointment, Ashton needed to respond to four major widely held expectations. First, at an institutional level, she was expected to demonstrate a serious capacity to calm the debilitating turf wars between the Council and the Commission. Second, she was required gently to nudge the EU into exercising some leverage over the major security policy challenges of the coming years. The third expectation was to develop strategic vision. Finally, she was expected to preside over the creation of a functional and smooth-running External Action Service. These expectations were without any doubt excessive. Twenty years ago, the British political scientist Christopher Hill, theorising about the EU as a diplomatic actor, coined the expression “an expectations-capabilities gap”⁶¹. That concept, as the German political scientist Niklas Helwig has argued, clearly applies even more poignantly to the post-holder who is expected to deliver such a policy⁶². Federica Mogherini has her work cut out...

⁶⁰ Rettman, Andrew (2013), “Ashton drops big ideas on EU foreign affairs”, *EUObserver* 13 June

⁶¹ Hill, Christopher (1993), “The Capability-Expectations Gap, or Conceptualising Europe’s International Role,” *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 31/3, pp.305-28

⁶² Niklas Helwig (2013) “EU foreign policy and the High Representative’s capability-expectations gap – a question of political will” in *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 18/2, pp. 235-254.