The Role of the European External Action Service in Climate Diplomacy

Adapted from a paper presented by Dr Diarmuid Torney* for a workshop at Governance Innovation Week, University of Pretoria, 1-5 June 2015

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Introduction

The 2009 Copenhagen climate change summit highlighted the European Union’s (EU) inability to shape international outcomes in line with its own preference. Similarly, the EU’s, responses to the Arab Spring and the Iraq war revealed the Union was either unable or unwilling to respond effectively to global crises. Some explanations for the varied and sometimes limited effectiveness of the EU on the world stage focus on the institutional complexities of the EU and its apparent inability to “speak with one voice” internationally. Other explanations link broader changes in world politics, since the 2008 global financial crisis, with a decline in the power of the EU.\(^1\)\(^2\) While these two perspectives explain important parts of the story, they each tend to neglect the importance of the other. Perspectives emphasising intra-EU factors often fail to adequately appreciate how the international context conditions the scope for EU external

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governance. Equally, perspectives focusing on the international context often seem to strip the EU of agency, viewing it simply as a passive receiver of that international context.

What links these internal and external perspectives is the EU’s ability to engage effectively with key partner countries - to listen to and understand the interests, preferences and domestic politics of the third countries with which it engages. The EU’s ability to do this is largely dependent on the institutional, human and financial resources that it invests in diplomatic outreach, its diplomatic presence in third countries, as well as its ability to effectively utilise the information gleaned through diplomatic outreach. The aim of this policy brief is to trace recent developments in the EU’s capabilities for climate diplomacy, particularly focusing on the role of the European External Action Service (EEAS).

Diplomatic Capability and the EU External Relations

A number of recent studies have emphasised how the external context is an important factor in determining the differential effectiveness of the EU in global climate negotiations. Although the EU cannot change the external context, the way that it responds can be changed. Therefore, understanding the convergence and divergences of interests between itself and partner countries can help the EU achieve its goals.

Foreign ministries can have a role here in terms of gathering information and seeking to understand the external context and constraints in which the EU attempts to achieve its international climate goals. Therefore, although not traditionally a core aspect of foreign ministries mandates, diplomats increasingly see climate change and other global issues as new areas for diplomacy.

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In order for foreign ministries to deepen their understandings of interests and domestic politics in third countries, they need to reach out to non-governmental actors and other stakeholders beyond the government-to-government level. By doing this, they have the potential to influence the political conditions for climate action in other countries, including shaping narratives of climate action that resonate with the interests of influential stakeholders. Foreign ministries should also contribute to building a better picture of the strategic landscape, which can help in the creation of more effective negotiation strategies by better understanding the red lines of negotiation partners. This can help also to identify political trade-offs and to build political bargains by joining the dots between climate and other aspects of a country’s foreign relations.

The ability of the EU to effectively engage with partner countries can be thought of as a three-step process. The first step is intelligence gathering in third countries. Diplomats on the ground gather information regarding relevant actors, their preferences and relative positions of influence within domestic political processes. The degree to which the EU Delegation and member state embassies in a third country effectively pool and share such intelligence is also important. The EU does not only speak sometimes with many voices, but also listens with many ears.

The second step is the transmission mechanism from on-the-ground intelligence gathering to Brussels and European national capitals. Even the highest quality and most useful information gathered by diplomats may be of limited use if it is not fed back effectively to national capitals. The third step is the effective incorporation of the intelligence gathered into foreign policy decision-making processes. A potential hindrance to this step is the complex nature of the EU policy process, as it already struggles to cope with the competing perspectives of 28 member states without the added complication of including relevant information from the EU’s partner countries as well.
The next section of the brief will focus on the extent to which the creation of the EEAS has strengthened the diplomatic capabilities of the EU.

**EU climate diplomacy prior to the creation of the EEAS**

Since the 1980’s, the EU’s primary focus in its external climate governance concerned the EU’s participation in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations. Initially, the EU had limited impact, with little evidence of unity among EU member states in key UNFCCC negotiations in 1992. With time, EU involvement in the negotiations became more unified, but often at the expense of flexibility. The EU was frequently accused of “bunker mentality” spending too much time during international negotiations sessions consulting internally amongst its own member states. During this time, there was limited engagement with other actors outside of the formal setting of the UNFCCC framework, and there was very limited EU capacity on the ground in third countries.

The profile of climate change in European politics was boosted considerably by the decision of the US to withdraw from the Kyoto Protocol. This withdrawal generated a strong reaction from European leaders and government ministers. “Saving” the Kyoto Protocol became more than an environmental goal, but a key goal of an emergent EU foreign policy by heightened European identification with the Kyoto Protocol.

Following this, more extensive capabilities for external climate governance were developed by the EU. One institutional innovation was the creation of the “Green Diplomacy Network” in 2002, which aimed to integrate environmental policies into the external relations activities of the EU and link the environmental activities of the member states and the Commission in particular third countries. The EU also increased priority in developing institutionalised bilateral relations with key third countries on climate change, with the initiation of a range of dialogues
in recent years. However, these partnerships were often accompanied by limited financial and human resources.⁸

In parallel, the EU significantly streamlined the institutional basis of its participation in the UN climate negotiations. In 2004, the EU instituted a system of “lead negotiators” supported by “issue leaders” for the climate negotiations, drawn from the Commission and member state delegations, who hold these positions for periods longer than the six-month EU Presidency term.⁹ These reforms led to greater expertise and continuity in the EU’s negotiating capacity at the official level, and a greater scope for the EU negotiators to engage in informal outreach activities with other parties during in UNFCCC negotiation sessions.

The Lisbon Treaty and the establishment of the EEAS

The entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 aimed to strengthen the external capabilities of the EU through the creation of a permanent President of the European Council, a High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the EEAS. Furthermore, two new directorates general (DGs) were created within the Commission responsible respectively for Climate Action and Energy. DG Clima was formed out of the relevant elements of DG Environment, the functions of the old DG Relex relating to the international climate negotiations, and the climate change functions of DG Enterprise and Industry. While DG Clima has been able to increase its Brussels-based staff working on climate change, it remains small compared with many other DGs.

Under the post-Lisbon arrangements, EU Delegations in third countries, consisting of both the EEAS staff and the sectoral policy experts from relevant Commission DGs formally took on the role of coordinating activities of the EU delegations and member state embassies. Conducting demarches on behalf of the EU also became the responsibility of EU delegations in third countries.

The participation of the EU in UN climate change negotiations was not altered significantly after the Lisbon Treaty. Under the 2010 Spanish EU Presidency, a deal was brokered on how the EU would be represented, namely by the Presidency and the Commission, speaking behind the “European Union” name plate, with internal coordination remaining the responsibility of the Presidency.

The EEAS faced particular difficulty with respect to its involvement in the external dimensions of sectoral policy areas. In the establishment of the EEAS in 2010, the Commission relocated staff dealing with international dimensions of sectoral policy areas from the old DG Relex to the relevant sectoral DGs, in an attempt to retain expertise. This left the EEAS facing an uphill battle to establish expertise in horizontal policy areas. A small Global and Multilateral Issues division consisting of 15 staff members was established to cover the full spectrum of global sectoral policy areas from the EEAS side. Within this, only one person was initially assigned to work specifically on climate change (increased to two in early 2015).

**EU post-2015 climate diplomacy mobilisation**

Recent years have seen attempts to scale up EU climate diplomacy in the run-up to Conference of the Parties 21 (COP21) in Paris in December 2015. As part of this process, the Green Diplomacy Network was re-launched. Now coordinated by the EEAS in Brussels, rather than by the rotating EU Presidency, the Green Diplomacy Network involves the participation of the Commission's DGs Clima, Environment and Devco (development cooperation), as well as representatives from member state governments. A parallel Green Diplomacy Network operates in each third country. The effectiveness of these on the ground networks varies depending on the level of capacity in the country.
In July 2011, the EEAS and DG Clima prepared a paper entitled “Towards a renewed and strengthened EU climate diplomacy”. This was a response to certain EU member states who requested more attention be devoted to climate change. The paper identified opportunities for stepping up climate diplomacy and focused on three principal strands of action that identified climate diplomacy as a strategic priority, encouraged low emissions development and supported the nexus between climate, natural resources, prosperity and security.

A follow up paper entitled “EU climate diplomacy for 2015 and beyond” identified priorities for EU climate diplomacy. The paper tasked EU stakeholders with developing a “climate diplomacy toolbox” which would include emphasis on diplomatic dialogues, support for low-carbon development and the nexus between climate, resources, prosperity and security. The EEAS and the Commission then worked together to produce a set of internal documents setting out “common narratives” and “country profiles”. External consultants were commissioned to produce 4-5 page long documents for 30 priority countries covering key aspects of climate change and energy policy.

In November 2014, Federica Mogherini was appointed High Representative for Union Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice President of the Commission. She is reported to be significantly more engaged on climate diplomacy than her predecessor. This high level political impetus within the EEAS combined with building momentum and pressure towards COP21 led the Foreign Affairs Council to endorse a Climate Diplomacy Action Plan prepared by the EEAS and DG Clima. This established a detailed set of actions under four headings: political action, climate diplomacy, supportive actions to strengthen our ‘network on climate exchange’, and advocacy.

Under climate diplomacy, an extensive set of demarches were conducted related to the “Intended Nationally Determined Contributions” (INDCs), under which countries were expected to come forward in the UNFCCC framework with statements of their planned post-2020 climate actions. The aim was to gather information on the state of preparation of INDCs and the local

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political context to give intelligence to EU negotiators on what was going on, and to use demarches to put pressure on specific groups of countries to accelerate as much as possible the publication of their INDCs. These demarches took place in more than 60 countries and were conducted at ministerial or vice-ministerial level, with a couple at the level of president of prime minister. The aim was to reach beyond the “usual negotiators” to a more political level. The second and more innovative aspect of the Climate Diplomacy Action Plan was the commissioning in May 2015 of “heads of mission reports” on climate policy in third countries.

However, despite the reforms and increased mobilisations in the run up to the COP21, the EEAS remains constrained by limited resources. With only two members of staff in the EEAS specifically tasked to work on climate change, it remains very small by comparison to the larger member states, particularly the UK which has prioritised climate change in its diplomatic service for the past decade and France which has scaled up its climate diplomacy capabilities considerably in the build up to COP21 in Paris. The picture of limited EEAS capacity is replicated in the EU delegation abroad. Very few delegations have a dedicated climate change attaché, therefore as part of Climate Diplomacy Action Plan EU delegations were asked to nominate a focal point for climate change within the first quarter of 2015.

**Conclusion**

The development of the EU’s capabilities for climate diplomacy and the evolving role of the EEAS has boosted the Union’s ability to engage with and listen to partner countries. The EEAS faced an uphill struggle to establish itself, and lack of resources remains a pressing issue. Nonetheless, in gearing up for COP21, it has begun to devote greater high-level attention to climate diplomacy in conjunction with DG Clima. A set of demarches are being conducted at head of delegation level over the course of 2015 on climate change topics in the run-up to Paris 2015, with many of these reaching ministerial or even prime ministerial level. Moreover, EU delegations now have a nominated focal point for climate change. EU delegations also prepared “heads of mission reports” on climate change in their respective countries, which aimed to feed
back to Brussels and member state capitals. This is perhaps the clearest sign of the Union’s increasing attempt to listen in European climate diplomacy.

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