

The European External Action Service and the United Nations: a missed opportunity for self-promotion

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The European Union has finally acquired an upgraded status at the United Nations. On 3 May 2011, a resolution¹ was passed in the UN General Assembly, granting the EU delegation at the UN the right to speak on behalf of the EU. Voting on the resolution had been delayed since September 2010 at the request of 76 UN Member States; its near-unanimous victory now marks a triumph of EU representation on the world stage - a direct success of the European External Action Service (EEAS). The problem is that no one noticed.

Although the success of the UN resolution shows that the EU has effectively communicated its objectives within the General Assembly, now the EEAS must better communicate among EU leaders and to its European public. A "single voice" of the EU requires streamlined organisation, outreach and carefully crafted public diplomacy. If the EEAS already has a communication strategy or outreach plan to both its internal leaders and public or to the world, there is little evidence. This deficiency became obvious when no less than five senior EU officials released repetitive declarations, statements and press releases after the killing of Osama bin Laden. The EU's High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, released her statement last.

The EU is now a type of advanced observer at the UN, meaning it may make interventions during sessions, participate in the general debate, present amendments and proposals, and exercise the right of reply. Prior to the resolution, the EU's "observer status" meant that it could only speak following the 192 UN Member States. The upgraded, enhanced status does not mean the EU is a full member of the UN General Assembly, although the difference is subtle - the right of reply is only available once, instead of twice.

The resolution also changes who may represent the EU in the General Assembly. Despite the continued presence of the EU delegation to the UN since 1964, the voice of the EU had been the UN ambassador of the EU Member State holding the rotating presidency. Now, the Acting Head of the EU Delegation at the UN, Ambassador Pedro Serrano, may speak on behalf of the EU. Alternatively, the EU may also be represented by Baroness Ashton, or by President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy; who were not permitted to address the General Assembly at the September Millennium Development Goals Summit because of the delay in voting.

The resolution was originally proposed in September 2010, citing the Treaty of Lisbon which gives the EU a legal personality to sign international treaties. The resolution instead was blocked by a counter-resolution proposed and supported by the Caribbean regional grouping CARICOM, which delayed consideration of the EU's resolution - a surprise and an embarrassment to many EU diplomats. The counter-resolution passed by 76 to 71 with 26 abstentions: many like-minded Member States abstained and countries in Africa and the Caribbean voted to delay consideration, despite their aid relationship with the EU.

One explanation for the delay was a lack of understanding of how the Treaty of Lisbon changed the EU and a lack of communication to the UN General Assembly on the implications of an upgraded observer status. The resolution's second chance in May 2011 passed with a near unanimous vote of 180 to zero, with two abstentions. The EEAS, which became effective between the time of the initial proposal of the resolution and the final vote, should see the voting record as a diplomatic success.

The significant change in UN status was ignored in many EU Member States and indeed in Brussels. Instead, high expectations of the EEAS and Baroness Ashton have led to criticism which continues to make headlines. Recently, the UK Foreign Secretary William Hague downplayed the EU as merely an economic power, and, more alarmingly, the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Steven Vanackere, publically criticised Catherine Ashton herself. The Service must counter criticism with stronger public diplomacy, as well as more effective promotion and access to EU foreign policy. Simply put: the EEAS must “sell” itself better.

The EEAS has not effectively communicated the upgraded status at the UN, and has missed the opportunity to gain needed political capital from the change. The Service does not list the resolution on the “top stories” of the EEAS website - which is infrequently updated. Furthermore, Baroness Ashton’s statement on the resolution is already buried with other daily dispatches and can only be found after a thorough search. Beyond the EU’s borders, articles in the international media reporting the change in status were only published several days after the resolution, many of which also included the critique of Catherine Ashton by top political leaders from EU Member States.

The EEAS and Baroness Ashton should promote its triumphs in response to its many critics. The Service must increase its accessibility both to the Member States and the general public; it should draw attention to positive results while improving the delivery of its message. Weak or lacking communication and information sharing on important topics will only draw further attacks. The initial rejection of the UN resolution may have been due to a lack of information, but missing the opportunity to advertise the success of the EEAS is poor public diplomacy.

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¹ Resolution a/65/L.64/Rev.1