

European interview

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“Overall, the European Union is perceived as a front runner”

What does it mean to be an EU Ambassador?

Being an EU Ambassador means representing the European Union in all its dimensions, all its institutions. It is a title that has been the subject of some debate, because some have said that, legally speaking, you are not an Ambassador of the Union, but rather «Ambassador, Head of the Union Delegation». There is no play on words: it is an ambassadorial function that implies leading the Union Delegation in the country of residence. It is called a «delegation» and not «embassy» but in reality, it is a diplomatic mission in the sense of the Vienna Convention with all the prerogatives and constraints that go with it. Before leaving for his post, the Ambassador receives his credentials, co-signed by the President of the Commission and the President of the Council, which reflects the fact that he is the embodiment of the European institutions in their entirety.

What are the differences with the Member States' Embassies? Are these complementary missions?

The most obvious difference is that we do not represent a country, but an institution, an organisation. In terms of perception, this sometimes leads to misunderstandings regarding our status and our mission, particularly in relation to that of the Member States. Hence some explaining has to be done. But, once again, in terms of status it is the same thing.

It can be said that there is a form of complementarity. First of all, there are attributions which are very similar, even identical. The general role of a head of diplomatic mission is to represent his or her country or institution in the country of residence, to implement the policies decided by the political authorities, to inform about the country's situation, to make recommendations of a political, economic, security or other nature. In this sense, the jobs are very similar.

How is it complementary? It is complementary when it comes to discussions about the European Union - Member States'

dynamic. The Lisbon Treaty introduced the function of EU Ambassador. Before that, there was a representative of the European Commission. And in many countries his remit was trade, development aid, humanitarian action, but not foreign and security policy. Everything pertaining to foreign policy was dealt with in a Troika format between the Ambassador of the Member State holding the Presidency of the Council of the Union, the one who had held the post before and the one who would hold it after. The representative of the European Commission in situ was not involved in this exercise. This is where the Lisbon Treaty changed everything. It created the post of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Policy and Security Affairs, the European External Action Service and radically transformed the former representations of the European Commission into European Union Delegations headed by an Ambassador, Head of Delegation. This person not only assumed the functions previously exercised by the Commission's representative, but also became the standard bearer of the common foreign and security policy. This completely erased the role of the rotating Presidency in this respect. Since the Treaty of Lisbon, the EU Ambassador has chaired the meeting of the Member States' Ambassadors, which can take place once a month - that was the case when I was in Pakistan or Bangladesh - or once a week, for example when I was in Kabul. So, there are consultations, political reflexion is coordinated. The EU Ambassador is therefore the local facilitator of European diplomacy.

It is within this framework that the mechanisms necessary to speak on behalf of the 27 Member States are developed?

It is important to note that the EU ambassador does not represent the 27 Member States, but the EU institutions. On matters of common foreign and security policy, duly mandated, on the basis of agreed language, yes, he speaks for the 27. This requires unanimity - there are local discussions, in the capitals, in Brussels to establish a common language, down to the last comma. Once this common language is completely

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agreed upon by the 27, the EU Ambassador speaks on behalf of the 27. And I have often done this with or without my fellow Ambassadors from the Member States. The EU Ambassador goes to see the Head of State, the Prime Minister or a minister to deliver a message on behalf of the 27.

Is the existence of European Embassies contributing to the emergence of a European diplomatic culture?

Yes, but it will take time. Firstly, the EU Delegations provide something for the Member States. For example, there are some very large capitals where all the European States are represented: Washington, Beijing, Delhi. But in most countries, there are fewer of them. In Pakistan seventeen Member States are present, there are 13 in Bangladesh and 8 in Afghanistan. I even know of one capital, Lesotho, where there is no Member State and only the EU Ambassador. That being said, there is also work to be done to create a common dynamic, and this involves regular meetings with the ambassadorial colleagues of the Member States and the constant quest for the so-called political «critical mass» that we are aiming to achieve through the Union.

How are these synergies between Member States perceived by the countries of residence?

First of all, there is a general problem of perception. When you move away from the core group of people who know the EU well, there is still some explaining work to be done. This obviously depends on the country and the person. There are local correspondents who have been posted in Brussels and who know how the Europe works. After all, this new regime is very young - ten years is a very short time in terms of diplomatic relations - and there is obviously a learning curve for those who are less familiar with the subject. But overall, the EU is seen as a front runner. This is mainly due to the economic power and budgetary capacities that are in many cases disproportionate to those of most Member States. The single market has over 450 million consumers who enjoy high purchasing power. For many third countries, the EU is the main economic partner. This means that for a very large number of countries, as an ambassador, you are the first trading partner, the first buyer and/or the first supplier. This is what I experienced in Pakistan and Bangladesh. This is especially true because for developing countries, obtaining or, as the case may be, preserving access

to the single market under privileged conditions, what is known as the «generalised system of preferences», is absolutely crucial and this economic and commercial dimension is vital. In addition, for most developing countries, the Union is the main provider of development and humanitarian aid. You can see the image that is forming around the local embodiment of the European Union: a leading partner for national authorities but also for representatives of third countries or international organisations.

You mentioned the economic weight and the strength of the single market, what are the Union's main diplomatic levers?

This is indeed a central issue because it is not enough to be the first, you have to translate this into political influence. It is not enough to provide a lot of development aid, humanitarian aid, or to have a leading trade relationship for countries to automatically be aligned on issues that are essential for Brussels and for the Member States, such as respect for human rights or governance. Sometimes this is a source of frustration, progress is slow, sometimes relations deteriorate. There are also positive examples. In Bangladesh, in 2013, a garment factory building collapsed and more than 1,000 people, mostly women, lost their lives. As the country benefits from privileged access to the European market under the «Everything but Arms» regime (no customs duties, no quotas), there was a feeling of responsibility, especially as this regime is not granted automatically, a certain number of principles must be respected. At the time of this tragedy, the EU asked the Dhaka authorities to change the labour laws and bring the factories in line. 60% of Bangladesh's clothing production is exported to Europe - the leverage effect was immediate and certain. We saw the legal situation change in a few weeks. Within a few months, we saw a whole process of certification of factories and closure of those that were not up to standard. Bangladesh is now a country where you can find some of the most excellent garment factories. There has been considerable progress thanks to the European Union, the Member States and other partners involved in this process.

There are cases where we are unfortunately less satisfied with the outcome, where we would like to see more progress. In general, it is quite difficult to measure the success of development aid. The European Union is more interested in making an impact through very large programmes. It is one of

the only actors to intervene more and more in development aid via what is known as direct budgetary support, which comprises allocating a certain amount each year to the state budget, in particular sectors such as education, health or, in general, to support reform. It takes time, it is not a blank cheque, and the impact is real.

These are just a few examples of European action that is carried out collectively: the Union and the Member States working shoulder to shoulder to really influence the course of events. So that this considerable effort guided by our values, by our interests, bears fruit.

When you were ambassador to Vanuatu, what was your view of the militarisation of the Indo-Pacific area? Do you think the EU could be a power in the region? Should it play a role there?

My experience in Vanuatu goes back a few years. I was French Ambassador in Port-Vila from 2005 to 2008. At the time, there was no talk of the Indo-Pacific and even less talk of militarisation. The first eco-refugees - people who had to leave their villages near the coast to resettle in the hills - appeared in Vanuatu. But even in a country like this, which on the face of it was not of direct strategic interest, there was a sense of external influence. When you are the French Ambassador to Vanuatu, you are lucky enough to be next to France, since you are an hour's flight from New Caledonia, and therefore advantage can be taken of the instruments of decentralised regional cooperation between a French community in the Pacific and an independent country like Vanuatu.

Today, I think that my colleague who is posted there hears much more about the Indo-Pacific, about the influence of the global powers on these island countries in terms that are sometimes quite worrying. Does the European Union have a role to play? I sincerely believe so. A month ago, the European Union presented its strategy for cooperation with the Indo-Pacific area, a strategy that covers several areas: climate change, development aid, health in the context of the Covid pandemic, maritime safety issues and security in general. This immense Indo-Pacific area is being considered since it stretches from the east coast of Africa to the island states of the Pacific, or even to the Pacific coast of Latin America. The European Union and the Member States are present in these countries. As far as France is concerned, there are the overseas territories in the

Indian and Pacific Oceans where representation is high profile, including one that is military. France has adopted two strategies for the Indo-Pacific: one general and the other for defence. Other Member States have also adopted strategies for the Indo-Pacific: Germany and the Netherlands. In all these strategies, there is a will to work together with the other Member States and, above all, with the European institutions. I believe that there is a real recognition by the Member States but also by third countries of what the Union can bring to these regions and these countries, also because of its commercial power, what it represents in terms of development aid and humanitarian action but also increasingly in terms of diplomacy and involvement in security and defence issues.

As a former EU Ambassador to Afghanistan, how do you view the return of the Taliban to power?

I spent three years in Afghanistan, from 2017 to 2020. I left Kabul on 31 August 2020, one year to the day before the last American soldier left. This scenario had not been completely ruled out, but it was not the most likely one either. It was felt that this country meant a lot to the international community, including the US. The prevailing feeling was that there was no military solution to this conflict and that by giving time to time, the peace negotiations in Doha would succeed. This was not the scenario that prevailed however, and we all witnessed the chaos at Kabul airport. I think things have to be put into perspective. It must be understood that in twenty years Afghanistan has been partially transformed and I think that the first to admit this, even if they don't say so openly, are the Taliban. From 1996 to 2001, they managed or tried to manage a completely different Afghanistan, it was a very small administration. A country that had just come out of war, and one that was very isolated. So rudimentary means were enough to administer in the country roughly, a country that had known only misfortune and conflict. For twenty years, although incompletely and imperfectly, the State was established. A civil, urban, educated society was formed. It is still there. The first call of the Taliban was for civil servants to come back and occupy the offices: «we need you». The second call from the Taliban was to the international community: «Don't go, we need you too to make the country work». For the time being, we are still too close to 15 August to really see how things are going to evolve but I believe, I hope in any case, that a form of pragmatism should work and that the country will be able to develop towards a situation that will not be what we in Europe call respect for human rights, particularly for women, but where

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the most obvious excesses that we see today - women who cannot work, girls who cannot go to school - will stop. I believe that this cannot continue because the country is rapidly sinking into an extremely serious humanitarian crisis. The EU has made commitments to help the population. This is the problem with sanctions, which aim to put pressure on an authority without the population paying the price. We have not found a magic solution, but there are actions that tend to achieve this balance, and I hope that we will succeed. In Afghanistan, there was an economy that was very imperfect, but which was starting to emerge, and this economy has come to a standstill; the banks are closed. This is partly because the assets of the Afghan Central Bank are frozen abroad. I don't think this can last more than a few months. Being relatively pragmatic and realistic, one can hope that the countries that have influence over the new Afghan leadership will use that influence in the interests of Afghanistan but also in their own interests to move towards a regime that respects some of the most basic human rights.

Beyond what you said about humanitarian aid, do you think that the European Union can play another role?

A political role. Engagement with countries in the region that have influence over Afghan dynamics. There are a growing number of regional meetings: Moscow, Teheran, bilateral discussions with Beijing, the Pakistani government is obviously in the front line, Qatar too, and then there are the countries of Central Asia, Uzbekistan, which wants to play a role and this must be encouraged. These are countries with which the European Union has relations, and obviously these must be used to ensure that regional governments are closely involved in encouraging the Taliban to move towards this middle way. There should be no delusion however. There will be no immediate return to what has prevailed for the last 20 years, which was already very perfectible. Secondly, it is a matter of an agreement between the 27 Member States to identify ways and means of dialogue with the new leaders in Kabul on issues of governance and human rights.

France will hold the Presidency of the Council of the European Union in January and has made the issue of defence and strategic autonomy a priority. What is your view on these two priorities?

The French President has spoken twice recently about this. In the context of the fall of Kabul, he insisted that «the Europe of

defence is now». A month later, during the crisis with Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom, the President of the Republic repeated that «the Europe of defence is now». These two speeches reflect a deep-seated aspiration on the part of the French government and President Macron to see the Union become more involved in defence issues with a view to achieving a form of European strategic autonomy. The French Presidency will certainly be an opportunity to make progress in this area. One marker will be very important: the adoption of the «strategic compass». This exercise is currently being discussed by the 27 and is to be approved during the French Presidency. It aims to identify common threats and to define, on the basis of this shared conception of risks and threats, common policies in different areas. Ursula von der Leyen has also announced a defence summit, probably in March, which will be a crucial time to discuss these issues.

The Europe of defence, the defence of Europe, is an extremely complex field; some sectors might advance faster than others, typically regarding industrial and technological issues. A revolution is now ongoing; on 1 January 2020 the European Commission created a Directorate-General for the Defence Industry and Space (DG DEFIS) responsible for the management of a budget, that of the European Defence Fund (EDF), worth €8 billion over seven years to encourage and facilitate joint research and development programmes. This puts European industry, the European defence industrial base, at the centre of the system. It is an important, if not pivotal, element of what this keenly expected Europe of defence and strategic autonomy might eventually be. There is other work involving operational aspects; there is the idea of a rapid reaction force to intervene in the event of a crisis before it escalates completely. There is also the « European Peace Facility » which is soon to be operational with a substantial budget of 5 billion € over seven years. The European Peace Facility should and already does co-finance military operations led by the European Union and the Member States and contributes to the strengthening of countries by giving them equipment, including lethal weapons, a first in the history of European integration. Another interesting sign is that there is what we might call military or defence attachés in some EU delegations. I know that ten years ago when this debate was launched it was said that it was «too early», «this is not the way to go». Today it exists, we are there.

What should be done to make the European External Action Service (EEAS) more effective?

I was a witness and, at local level, an actor in the creation of this service. There is now a diplomatic network of just over 140 EU delegations around the world, including both bilateral and international organisations, which are working well. There is still room for improvement, and I can identify at least three.

Firstly, the visibility and legibility of the Union's actions abroad: there must be explanation of what the Union is, what it does, why and how it is done. This is a bit complicated because, abroad, people do not necessarily have a very precise image of what the European Union is and a fortiori of what it does, what it does not do, why it does it, its values, etc. So, there is a huge amount of work to be done to make the European Union more visible. A great deal of communication work has to be undertaken, which is not limited to celebrating Europe Day and the Schuman Declaration once a year, on 9 May. It is a collective piece of work, with the Member States, and daily communication and explanation.

Secondly, for this European diplomacy to be more effective, an *esprit de corps* needs to be developed within the EEAS. One of the difficulties is that there is still a long way to go in terms of national diplomacy, from what one might in France call «the career», from the body of civil servants of diplomats. It is much more complicated in the EU delegations, which is both a difficulty and an advantage because they are multinational teams. My colleagues came from all over Europe, representing different nationalities, different experiences, different professional backgrounds, different skills, different mindsets. There are people from the Commission, people on contract, people seconded by

Member States. An *esprit de corps* has to be consolidated. In the three countries where I served, which are difficult places, there was a permanent rotation of agents which made it an additional difficulty, a real challenge to build a collective spirit. This is important. It will happen over time, but close attention has to be paid to this.

Finally, I think that European diplomacy has to be bolder. It is complicated to get things moving. For example, the relationship with time. Often Europe is the last to get on board. For a very simple legal and political reason, since a consensus among the 27 has to be built. When it comes to responding to a crisis, it is relatively easy for a State like France to establish a position quickly at the Quai d'Orsay. For the European Union, it is much more complicated: it doesn't take a few minutes, or a few hours, but often several days. There has been progress, but action must be taken faster in the future to improve visibility and so that we are understood. The Union must surpass itself. For example, and I know that this is a complex debate, but if we could move from unanimity to qualified majority voting in foreign policy, it would be a huge step forward. And we must also be bolder in countries in crisis where the situation is difficult. We have to accept a certain level of risk. I experienced this in Afghanistan. I believe that we must dare to broaden the scope of our action because we cannot just work in our offices. You have to be more active on the ground.

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