

TUESDAY 20 OCTOBER 2015

Members present

Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top
Baroness Coussins
Lord Dubs
Lord Horam
Earl of Oxford and Asquith
Lord Risby
Baroness Suttie
Lord Tugendhat (Chairman)

Examination of Witness

Mr Pierre Vimont, Senior Associate, Carnegie Europe and former Executive Secretary-General, European External Action Service

Q67 The Chairman: Monsieur Vimont, thank you very much for coming before us. I remember vividly the last time we met. You were very helpful to the Committee when we were doing our EU/Russia report. You will notice that it is a different cast of characters now. We have a rotation system in the House of Lords and almost everybody else rotated off. I will rotate off very shortly, but I am delighted to be here with you today. I do not, I think, need to explain that we are doing an inquiry into the emerging European security strategy. There is a gentleman there recording what you say, but, if you want to say anything completely off the record, please do so. All of us have received, and I am sure read, your Carnegie paper, which I thought was very helpful. We sent you a list of questions, but no doubt colleagues will ask you others as well.

If I could begin, I was particularly struck by two points you made here. In one, you were talking about the expertise of the Commission and the momentum it has gathered. The other was towards the end of the paper when you said that the EU must therefore target its action on those issues and regions where it can have the

strongest impact. The lesson I draw from this is that you are thinking not so much in terms of a global strategy as of identifying those areas in which there is a clear European Union interest, and where the EU can make a difference. It is a matter of identifying those areas, not a matter of first and second-order issues. Perhaps you could speak to that.

Mr Pierre Vimont: Thank you for inviting me. I am quite impressed. It reminds me of the days when I tried to get into the National School of Administration.

A very good example is what we are witnessing at the moment in the way that Europe has to deal with the migration pressure. We all agree that we do not have unlimited resources, financial or human. We have witnessed recent meetings of our heads of state and government to address financial support to Turkey and, at the same time, financial support to Africa. They have to give human resources to some of the EU agencies—FRONTEX and EASO—and are having great difficulty and struggling to provide seconded experts from national Member States to EASO and other agencies. One detects that we are reaching a limit where we need to set priorities. We cannot be everywhere in the world, even if we want to remain a Union capable of having universal diplomacy or foreign policy, which to some extent we need to keep in mind. At the end of the day, even if we want to be present in Latin America, Asia or other places, we still have priorities to tackle, which are very much linked to our neighbourhood—eastern Europe, the Mediterranean region, the Sahel and some other places—because this is where the threats are at the moment with regard to our own security and stability and to some of our major economic partnerships. At the end of the day, if we want to be honest with ourselves and not deny reality, we need to set up priorities.

When I was preparing this paper, and discussed it with lots of colleagues in Carnegie and elsewhere, they rightly underlined the fact that defining priorities was one of the most difficult challenges for Europeans. Every Member State has its own priorities and therefore this is quite often difficult, but I am quite struck by the fact that today, as we try to move along, we are to a large extent constrained by events to set priorities. That is very important.

On your first question, we also have to go back to something that has struck me from the beginning about our foreign policy. If you look at the way the whole European Union started, when it was still called the European Community, the founding fathers built up this idea on what they thought was the failure of classical diplomacy in the first and second world wars. The whole idea behind the European Union was to try to set up a new kind of external action based on institutions here in Brussels, the rule of law and treaties that would have a permanent base; in other words, the whole diplomacy of the 19th century was thrown out of the window. The interesting thing is that Member States have not gone along with that and have remained with the traditional, classical view—certainly Britain, France and a few others—of what diplomacy is all about. What we have witnessed since 1958 is a permanent struggle between Member States on one side and the Commission on the other. If you look at

the way foreign policy has been built in Europe, Member States have retained much of their powers. It is still unanimity; it is still very much intergovernmental. The Commission on its side has slowly invented its own diplomacy, which we call "external action" in Brussels. It has developed a whole set of expertise and network in its fields of competence: development, assistance, human rights, humanitarian assistance, trade and a few others.

It is quite interesting that the Lisbon Treaty has been trying to bridge the gap. To some extent, it has succeeded here and there, but we are still very far away from a cohesive, comprehensive foreign policy. You just cannot dispel 50 years of what I would call bad habits, even confrontation, in a stroke, in a second. This is where we are the moment.

Q68 The Chairman: That gives rise to a great many questions that I would like to pursue, but let me put one question which I am really asking in order to get your answer on the record. You are making a clear distinction between those areas in which there is a security threat to members of the Union and those areas of the world which, however important, do not pose a security threat. In dealing with China or India, Britain and France, for instance, are no longer global powers. We deal with India and China largely in terms of our commercial interest, but in terms of our neighbourhood, regardless of whether you are a big or small country, our security is at stake. To quote Benjamin Franklin, if we do not hang together we will hang separately. Would that be a fair distinction?

Mr Pierre Vimont: I totally agree with you. The Ukraine conflict that we discussed last time I met the Committee is a very good reminder that we still have threats even on our borders and inside the European continent. If one looks at the southern dimension, it is even more impressive, if only to note that Daesh, the Islamic State, is presently in Sirte in Libya and other parts, and is slowly moving into other parts of the Sahel or the Horn, and probably Yemen. All this brings immediately to our minds the fact that very close to our own territory, we have a major security threat.

The question is: how do we answer that? Do we do it through our usual partnership inside NATO or do we do it by our own means? I think it must be a combination of both. At a time when we are wondering, for instance, whether we will ever have a Government of National Accord set up in Libya, how do we help that country get rid of its present instability and insecurity? How do we come in? We have plenty of ideas and some resources, but we still need to reflect a little more about the kind of assistance we can bring to that country, which is only a few miles away from our seashore. Whether it be Malta, Greece or Lampedusa in Italy, this is very close to our border. I do not think we have witnessed anything of that kind in recent years with regard to Europe. The whole issue of security is coming very much more to the forefront of our attention than previously.

Q69 Baroness Suttie: I would like to draw on your experience and expertise of the EEAS. How would you assess the relationship and level of trust between the EEAS and

the national capitals, states and the EEAS's relationship with the Commission? In the context of the strategic review, what measures could be taken to improve those relationships, if necessary?

Mr Pierre Vimont: To come back to what I was saying earlier about the history of the European Union, the difficulty is that the EEAS is a very strange administrative body inside the European Union. Just by watching the geography of this place, on one side of the street you have the Commission and on the other side of the street the European Council. There has been a constant struggle between these two institutions. Throwing into the middle of that the EEAS and trying to achieve a balancing act between the two institutions while keeping the confidence of both is a daily struggle. The EEAS has managed so far, but it is a very delicate balance at the moment, as each institution is looking very closely at the EEAS all the time to see whether it is moving from one side to the other.

In the first four years when I was in the EEAS, we managed to get a favourable opinion from the Member States, because they were surprised by the fact that we managed to hit the ground and run immediately and, therefore acted as we were asked to. Never forget that the EEAS was replacing the rotating presidency and I think we managed to do that rather well and they were pleased with that.

The simple fact that the new High Representative and Vice-President, Mrs Federica Mogherini, has decided to have her office in the Commission and has done what, by the way, Member States were asking for—namely better co-ordination among Commissioners in charge of external relations—immediately created the feeling inside the Council that she is moving towards the Commission. I think it is overdoing it a little, but sometimes such feeling among Member States is there. We have to admit that, for some time, the EEAS will be in a difficult situation where, whatever it does one side or the other will think it is acting against their interests to some extent. This is not fair. I think the High Representative, like her predecessor, is managing this balance in the best way possible. I admit that it is very delicate. The task given by the Lisbon Treaty to the EEAS without the capacity of a fully-fledged institution. Therefore, the EEAS is not an institution and we have to abide by the rules of either the Commission or Council.

To give you an interesting detail, when we are with the Council legal service, they want to hear only of the High Representative; they do not want to hear about the Vice President of the Commission; and when we are with the Commission it is exactly the reverse. We keep telling them that if they look at the Treaty, Mrs Mogherini, just like Lady Ashton before her, is both at the same time so how can you try to divide her? But that is the way they want to see her, each on its own side. That is why it is a bit complicated, but I think we are making progress. As time goes by, I think both institutions will get used to the fact that the EEAS belongs to both; it is part of both institutions and works for both of them. As well as the HRVP, the EEAS works for the President of the Commission and each and every one of the Commissioners; it also works for the President of the European Council and cooperates with the rotating

Presidency. We gives briefs to all of them. We are ready and at their disposal whenever they need, so this will slowly percolate through the minds of everyone and I think it will be for the better.

Your second question is about how the strategic review, or as we call it, the "security and foreign policy strategy" that is going to be built up, can also serve the purpose of improving this institutional framework. It is precisely what Mrs Mogherini is doing, which is to have a very open consultation, not only with both institutions but with Member States, the think-tank community and civil society organisations. It is just starting, so we will have to see how it works, but she is doing it in a very transparent way. It is quite different from the method of Javier Solana, who did it in a very swift way, in less than six months, having very quick consultation and immediately drafting something. She has done it in two stages: one took place up to June and the second one is going to be a very open and transparent consultation. I hope that at the end of the day there will be a strong sense of common ownership by all those involved, but this remains to be seen. We will have to see how it goes, but at least the goal and the way the process has been launched is rather interesting because it is a new one.

Q70 Lord Risby: In the summary of your paper you highlight one thing that is designed to improve functionality, which is perhaps formalising ad hoc groupings. You cite the example of the French and German efforts vis-à-vis Ukraine and Russia. You very correctly and properly said that there is a limit to what the structures can do in the form of finance, personnel and all these things, but this is a way of enhancing the functionality and success of this process. I would be interested to know how you think it could work, and what would be the trigger to suggest that one group of nations with a strategic, geographic or whatever interest could particularly get involved in this, and how it could come together without being dysfunctional.

Mr Pierre Vimont: I make a couple of observations in answer to your question. We cannot deny the reality that a Union of 28 members today, maybe even more tomorrow, is a very difficult organisation to work with when you have to manage a crisis. We see it also with the UN. The Security Council has difficulties, even more so as people are discussing the possibility of enlarging it. We have a body of 28 Member States with different positions, opinions and conceptions of what EU foreign policy should be, and this is a very striking example. For instance, the UK conception of foreign policy, because of history, size and dimension, is naturally different from what may be the conception of Latvia, Estonia or even Hungary about EU foreign policy. Because of these differences in status and position to some extent it seems reasonable to me that, if we want to be a Union that can play a role and be an active player in foreign policy, quite often when we face these kinds of crises, as we witness today in Syria, Yemen, Libya or Ukraine, we need to find another way of doing things. This is more or less what we have been doing for some time.

The recent agreement in the Iran nuclear negotiation is a very good example. It started with three EU Member States: UK, Germany and France. The three Foreign

Ministers decided to take an initiative. What was interesting and quite striking at that time is that when they reached an agreement by the autumn 2003 with Iran, whereby that country suspended its nuclear programme and launched into negotiation, the three Member States immediately came to the conclusion that they needed to take on board Javier Solana and that he should be the chair of the small group, in order for the other Member States—at that time we were only 15—to feel a sense of ownership of that small contact group, or whatever you call it.

We did the same thing before in the western Balkans—Bosnia and elsewhere—where a group of Member States also played a major role, with the US and others coming in, as in the case of the Iranian talks. As to Ukraine, the famous Normandy format seems to be missing something. One of the reasons why some Member States had misgivings about the initiative taken by Chancellor Merkel and President Hollande is precisely that we did not have that European chair or presence on board. Several times, we said to our French and German colleagues, “Why do you not ask for a European representative, namely Mrs Mogherini, or the High Representative/Vice-President, to be on board and be part of this process?” The answer was, “We would love to, but we would get a negative answer from Russia”. We have found another way through, which is regular information and updating by the French and German Foreign Ministers to the High Representative. But it is not exactly the same. This is why, time and again, some Member States are not entirely satisfied with this way of doing things.

For me, with the flexibility of small groups, you can see pretty well how this could work if, for instance, tomorrow we want to take an initiative related to a peace agreement in Colombia in Latin America, or maybe some part of Africa, such as the Great Lakes. You could put together countries who know the area well—in Latin America, Spain of course, and in Africa, maybe Belgium. They could join the two or three big Member States who are usually part of those groups. You would have small groups with flexible composition, but you would need the presence of a representative from the EU institutions, namely the High Representative or one of her officials.

This could work and would be an efficient way of doing things. Many Member States admit rather easily the fact that, not being familiar with some part of the world, they should let those who know better deal with it. They can come in if they want, but otherwise they are rather happy, or at least comfortable with the fact that some Member States take the lead on this. Think about the Central African Republic. Many Member States do not know much about the Central African Republic; sometimes they do not even know where it is located. By the way, they are not the only ones. Therefore, to allow France, and maybe Britain, Belgium and a few others to take the lead and push forward a contact group that will be most active in this region, and to let them move ahead, is something that Member States can accept. What they want is to get regular information on what is going on and to have their representative, namely the High Representative and the EEAS as part of that team, regularly updated.

If they are being asked for a financial contribution, or a contribution, if we set up a military or civilian operation or mission, we must be sure that they are well informed on what is going on, and can give their opinion and their reaction on what is going on.

The wrong way of doing things—I am sorry to say this about the country I know best—was the French way when it went into Mali on its own. To some extent it was understandable because we did not have much time. The only country able to go into Mali and stop the Tuareg infiltration from the north was the French, because they had troops stationed close by, but to do the same afterwards in Central Africa and then very quickly come to Brussels and ask Member States “Now could you help us with a financial contribution?”, did not go down very well with EU partners. They were all taken by surprise and had the impression that the French were just asking for money without further information, consultation or co-operation between us.

I think the idea of a flexible Europe is one we will see more and more, even outside the realm of foreign policy, as a way of combining the number we are today—28 and maybe more tomorrow—and the need to be flexible, capable of moving quickly if need be into some of these crises and being able to manage some of them in an efficient way.

Q71 Lord Dubs: Can I say how interesting I found your paper? May I pursue the point you have just been dealing with? I find it very persuasive. Are you suggesting that ad hoc groupings of Member States could be the model for the future? Is it likely to be accepted by all 28 countries, but particularly the big ones, as a way of moving forward, because it is an interesting development on the whole process? Could you relate that to the comment you made at the beginning about the countries taking the classical view versus the others? Does that run counter to the idea of small groupings, or could it be part of it?

Mr Pierre Vimont: Maybe I will sound a little cynical. I think the big countries that have a tradition of very active national diplomacy, with some sort of universal vocation, can live with this concept of small groups as long as they are part of it. To some extent, they will be a core group, or at the centre of it, to which you can add additional Member States. I think all Member States could live with it—this is what I sense when I discuss it with my former colleagues—as long as it is done in the proper way: in other words, it should not be imposed upon them without any prior notification; it should be done with regular information and complete transparency; and, if some of those who are not part of the group at some point would like to join, it should be possible for them to do so, and so on and so forth. That is very important.

The countries that may resent these small groups are the middle-range countries, namely, to put it in simple terms, Italy and maybe Spain, and some others—namely, Sweden, Netherlands and a few others. Sometimes, they could resent the influence of the “big three” and sense that the way current EU foreign policy is moving it is

becoming more and more influenced, and a greater role is being exerted, by the "big three", and therefore the other ones are following.

This is one of the reasons why I think that, if you try to push the idea of flexible contact groups, or small groups, it would be interesting from time to time to have on board countries like Sweden or the Netherlands, which have very active national diplomacy and have a lot of input to give to these groups. Therefore, when I am talking about flexibility, I am also thinking about the flexible composition of these groups. That would also be very useful and important.

Q72 Baroness Coussins: One of the recommendations you make in your paper is that the new strategy should be designed to reflect the Union's responsibilities as a geopolitical power. Would it be right to infer from that that you support a continuation or development of the previous strategies and the description of the EU as a transformational power, or would you go along with the terminology we have heard from other witnesses who have said that what is now needed is a EU foreign policy that is transactional rather than transformational?

Mr Pierre Vimont: I would go along with your second option. We Europeans need to be a little more humble than we have been in the past. If you read the first security strategy, it looked like Europe was about to become the main actor in the international community. Since then, we have seen that the situation may be more complicated and complex than we thought at the time. There was a little hubris around that strategy.

From the an historical point of view, what could be called the "Solana strategy" was interesting because we were coming out of a rather difficult period in Europe when we had been pretty much divided on the Balkan and Iraq crises. We were coming out of these two major crises with a pretty strongly divided Europe. The idea that we could appear as one of the main powers in the international community seemed to me a little far-fetched, but anyway it is history and we need to look to the future.

As to the role Europe could play today if it accepts it, which is far from being agreed by all 28 Member States, the idea that Europe should be a geopolitical actor and perceive itself as such is, among some Member States, still questionable to some extent. When you discuss with some EU Member States the role we should play in, say, Syria—I will come back to defining the role—the simple fact that we should try to play a role in that crisis, or the Libyan crisis, is to some Member States still questionable. Some will say, "Let's stay out of this; we have nothing to win, so why not stay out of it and stick to our continent?" Those are usually the ones who say we have much more to do on the eastern side of Europe, because this is part of our territory or continent and Russia is a major threat—that is their point of view—and we need to deal with that first and foremost. Personally, I think that is wrong and we should do both, eastern and southern.

Coming back to the role we could exert in the Syrian crisis and in other crises like Yemen, Libya or the Middle East, we have a transactional role to play. We are in a

natural position to be an honest broker. I had a thought today, listening to what is being said about the recent Russian military interference in Syria and the way it is finding difficulty, and vice versa, in starting a dialogue with Washington and the regional actors—namely, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt and some of the Gulf countries—I was struck by the fact that Europe as such has many cards in its hand that it could play to act as an honest broker between the different partners and play a very useful role. For that purpose, we need to be united and that is the main problem for EU foreign policy. It is still a policy that needs to be agreed by all 28 Member States. If you do not have the 28 on board, you cannot move along. For me, it is obvious that, if we are all on board, it is an extraordinary opportunity for Europe at the moment to act as someone who could have an objective view about how to bring all the different partners around the table to try to get out of that crisis. Of course, we need to do it jointly with the UN and the Secretary-General's Special Envoy, but we could be a major support to the UN initiative because of the role we have played with regard to Iran, for example, in chairing the EU3+3. Think about our role in the past with regard to some of the crises we have been going through; or the way we managed the Libyan crisis, where some of the Member States were involved in the military operation; and the way the EU High Representative, then Cathy Ashton, managed to keep the door open with the Arab League and African Union. That was very interesting. We garnered there the trust and confidence of many of our partners which I think we could use today. It is a pity, to some extent, that we have great difficulty in getting all 28 Member States to agree on the way to play the role of honest broker, mediation or whatever you call it, where Europe could play a useful part.

Q73 Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top: To develop what you have been saying, which is fascinating, in a sense the Commission and EEAS now have the capability or technical ability to deliver particular ways of operating, but the political will is often not there. That weakens the operations but also means lack of clarity about the way forward and where the strategy should be. It seems as if that is the position we are in. Do you see any means of persuading and working with those Member States so they do buy into the need for a strategy and involvement, because at some stage all of that comes back to us? For example, Syria and Libya are the main reasons for the crisis in migration at the moment.

Mr Pierre Vimont: To come back to your assessment, what we are witnessing at the moment is a Commission with very good and strong expertise but which sometimes lacks the geopolitical vision, whereas Member States on their side quite often have that vision but lack the political will to make something of it, because either they are divided or sometimes they have some resistance to moving in. Some Member States will not want to move in; others have a contradictory position. Therefore, it is about bringing these two pieces together and having a coherent geopolitical vision, plus the instruments to implement it. If it works—I hope that one day it will—that would make the European Union a formidable actor in the international community,

because no one else among the international community has the ability to use all the different tools. We have all of them the EU has at our disposal, and that would make us a formidable actor.

For the moment, we do not have that common political vision. This is why, coming back to the security and foreign policy strategy, in the end it is about having all the different institutions somewhat aware of what is missing and being able to define both a strategic vision and afterwards the way to use our instruments for the implementation of that geopolitical analysis. That is why it is so important to have this moment of reflection and the ability for all of us to understand that.

Look at the way we are proceeding at the moment with some of the sectoral policies related to the foreign dimension, namely the reviews of EU neighbourhood policy, of our relation with ACP countries and of development assistance in relation to the new sustainable goals set by the UN. In each and every one of those cases, we are still working very much within the old process; in other words, the Commission is doing its homework very well, and Member States are watching a little from the outside and sometimes trying to give some input. But, at the end of the day, it is very much following the usual processes, whereby we miss a coherent, comprehensive geopolitical vision of what we are looking for.

The main question we should ask ourselves on the neighbourhood policy is: what are we looking for? What is the kind of partnership we are looking for in the years ahead? For me, one of the first questions is: is it still relevant to have inside our neighbourhood policy both eastern and the southern neighbourhood together in the same package? Many reasons for having these two partnerships together are well known: eastern and central European Member States being sure that their priority is on board; and southern Member States, like Italy, France or Spain, being sure that the Mediterranean neighbourhood is not forgotten. But the reality on the ground today, in what we are facing in eastern Europe—which is a whole issue about the kind of relationship we need to set up with Russia in the years ahead and, in the future what will be the new kind of "architecture" we want in our European continent with regard to the security and economic relationship—is totally different from what we are witnessing in the southern Mediterranean area. It is about the kind of political and economic relationship we want to have with other much more diversified partners. I think north Africa is facing challenges that are quite different from the ones that the Gulf countries or Middle East partners are facing—Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, if one day it comes out of its crisis. Europe needs a new vision based on the geopolitical reality of this neighbourhood

Q74 The Chairman: Before Lord Horam asks his question, I would like to clarify one matter. You talked about big and small countries. That was extremely interesting. Would you agree that a big difference between the European Union now and in the past is that today it is not only much bigger but there is one country which stands out so much above the others, namely Germany? The combination of these two factors

means that, if Germany feels its domestic interests are at stake, it is in a position to determine what the European position will be. You referred to the new way of doing things under the European Union compared with the past. At that time, the Community was smaller and there were a number of large countries, and no one country stood out head and shoulders above the others, but, for various reasons, Germany now stands out head and shoulders above the others, and therefore, when its own most sensitive interests are at stake, there is no question about whose will dominates.

Mr Pierre Vimont: I would largely agree, with only one nuance I would bring to your assessment. In the field of foreign policy, the German dimension is a little more complicated; in other words, because of its economic and financial capacity, Germany is certainly above the others, but when you deal with foreign policy, do not forget the reality that other large countries, namely Britain and France, still represent. They are permanent members of the Security Council and still have a large diplomatic network around the world. They see themselves as major actors in the international community, which to some extent is not the case with Germany. A few years ago Germany was more modest and, as you know, somewhat self-limited its role in foreign policy for all the reasons we know. This is changing, definitely. We are seeing much more active German diplomacy, which for a long time was very much looking to the European Union as its natural playground. It now looks as if things are changing in Berlin and we are witnessing a more assertive German diplomacy that is now playing on its own or with one or two other Member States, as we saw recently in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where Germany with the UK launched some new ideas to try to break the current deadlock in Sarajevo. But, largely, I would agree with you.

The difference between big, medium and small Member States has a lot to do, first, with diplomatic capacity and resources and whether they have active diplomacy, or otherwise, and, secondly, with the way they perceive what should be Europe's role in foreign policy. That goes further than only the "big three". I would put in the same group of "active diplomacy" many other countries like Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden or Denmark, which certainly want to see a very active European Union in the field of foreign policy. Others are less interested in such a role. This is where the difference lies.

Q75 Lord Horam: Like my colleagues, I enjoyed reading your paper enormously. It is extremely lucid. I hope that Mrs Mogherini will have a copy of it. I agree with your evidence that there is an opportunity for European Union countries to play a part in Syria, for example. If we play a part as honest broker, as you describe it, in a sense that is capitalising on the strength of our values. If we generate trust and confidence in other partners, be it America, Russia, China or whatever it may be, to a degree that is transformational. In putting our values forward as trustworthy people to do business with, we can play this particular role. That is important. As is said, never waste a good crisis, and maybe Syria is a good crisis not to waste from that point of view. As you also said, we have to get our act together. You point out the structural

difficulties between the way the Commission is organised and the way the EEAS is organised. In particular, you say in your paper that to help with this the EU should introduce simple and specific working rules at an administrative level to overcome the practical obstacles to implementation of a global strategy. Could you elaborate on that? Are these the ideas you have to get the EEAS and Commission to work together more, and what are these administrative practical rules?

Mr Pierre Vimont: There are many. I could give you a few examples. I tried to pinpoint a few of these practical rules in my paper, but it was a short one and I did not want to lose too much time. Let me give you one or two examples. One is when the EEAS is being asked by the Member States quite often, or we decide on our own, to make a contribution through a strategic paper on issues like what should be the future role of the European Union in the Sahel region, or with regard to Syria and Iraq, as we have done in the past, or in the Horn of Africa. At the moment, most of these papers cannot go out to the Council if we do not have the green light of the Commission, due to the EEAS being seen and perceived as—from an institutional point of view—part of the Commission, which means getting the green light from every service inside the Commission. God knows, this can take a long time. It is called inter-service consultation. When we manage to get through that kind of internal consultation, either the crisis is over or it has become worse and we need to do another paper.

My point is that, as a service that the EEAS needs to move swiftly and come up with ideas—sometimes a little like policy planning staff—we should be allowed to come out with papers that do not need to have the ownership of everybody; they can be seen very quickly. These papers should be under the EEAS's own responsibility, but they should go out quickly so Member States can take them on board and give their feedback, and that is the way we move. Imagine what it would be like if, in the Foreign Office, or French Quai d'Orsay, we needed to get inter-ministerial support and a green light before we can send papers to our Minister—we could not go on. Therefore, it is about adapting the working practices to the reality of diplomatic life.

The same is true of the way the EEAS recruits and appoints “diplomats” to our EU delegations. Sometimes, we have a very good head of delegation. Could we not be allowed to keep him one more year if we want to? No. After four years he or she has to leave, and that is the rule and the Commission wants to abide by it. If you want to keep him for one more year you have to go through once again a whole consultation to be sure everybody can agree with that. It is a very cumbersome process. We need to be able to adapt working practices to the reality with which the EEAS is struggling every day. That goes for financial rules, administrative rules and the papers we come out with. This is the kind of thing where the EEAS should be given a little leeway in order to perform more efficiently.

Q76 The Chairman: Mr Vimont, thank you very much indeed. It has been a most instructive session. I am extremely grateful to you. Could I ask one last question?

Since we are the British Parliament I hope you will be frank. Do you feel that over the last year the shadow of negotiation and referendum has inhibited the British contribution in this area? I am thinking not so much of the quality of British diplomats but the degree to which the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary have been involved in matters which you would expect a country of our size to be involved in.

Mr Pierre Vimont: I will be very honest with you. So far, I do not think so, for many reasons, one being that we have had so many crises in the last months in Europe on our hands that to some extent what I would call the British question has been somewhat left on the side here in Brussels. We have had the debt crisis, then the Greece issue and now migration. We have been very much focusing on these difficulties and allowing technical work to be done with regard to the British question. I think we are reaching the end of that limit and patience with the UK, and we really need to look into the British question very quickly and try to come out of this with not only clear answers and a clear understanding of the kinds of negotiations that the UK Prime Minister wants to have but, as much as possible, a quick outcome and result of that negotiation.

Where I share the implicit concern in your question is in relation to the referendum campaign. I understand that that could be a long campaign during next year. Having gone through some of these campaigns in my own country—two, by the way, one positive and one negative at the end of the day—this is I can only say these campaigns are an uphill struggle because it is very difficult to handle a referendum campaign when public opinion or a political party comes out with new ideas and questions all the time. When you are the Government in charge of that referendum campaign you are always in a reactive position, and running after events. That makes it a very difficult campaign.

A very good French political observer said that the problem with referendums is that you ask a question and people do not answer that question; they always answer another one that has to do with internal politics or whatever. Therefore, that makes it a very difficult campaign with regard to consideration of Europe. I am talking only about referendums on Europe. Europe is such a difficult concept for the average citizen to understand that they are always looking for something else. That is why I think that, if we manage to come quickly to the end of the negotiation that the British Government want to launch and get a result, the most difficult period will be the referendum campaign.

The Chairman: I am sure that you are right. Looking at it from the point of view of those of us who wish to stay, perhaps one advantage of our referendum, compared with the ones that you have had in France and elsewhere, is that the referendum is about the status quo, not about changing it. In general, when one looks at the experience of referendums, the status quo often comes through, but I do not think any of us would want to put a lot of money on the outcome. Thank you very much.