

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

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG, Managing Director, Middle East and North Africa,
European External Action Service

Q92 The Chairman: Dr Westcott, thank you very much for coming at what I realise is short notice, filling in and all the rest of it. I am sure you have been briefed at least on the fact that we are all members of the House of Lords Select Committee on the European Union. In particular, we are members of the Sub-Committee dealing with EU external affairs. We are pursuing a report on the emerging European security strategy. A record is being taken, but, if you want to go off the record, do say so. As you were not on the original list of people we were going to meet, perhaps you could explain briefly exactly what it is you do.

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: My name is Nick Westcott and I am currently managing director in the European External Action Service for Middle East and north Africa. Until about a month ago, I was managing director Africa, meaning sub-Saharan Africa. I have been with the EEAS more or less since it was founded in February 2011. I worked for four years with Cathy Ashton and, since November last year, Federica Mogherini, the High Representative, but I remain a member of Her Majesty's Diplomatic Service on temporary—we call it "supple"—leave.

The Chairman: Are people like you and the chap who is EU Ambassador in Belgrade on secondment and you know you can go back, or have you thrown in your lot with this new enterprise?

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: That is an interesting question. We have a right of return and we can do this job only as long as we continue to be a member of the British Diplomatic Service, so we go back. On the other hand, I am not on secondment because I am paid by the EU, not Her Majesty's Government.

Q93 The Chairman: Compared with the far-off days when I was involved with the Commission, the number of senior British officials in the Commission has fallen calamitously, and we are very under-represented in the Commission. Given our weight relative to other Member States, how are we off in the External Action Service?

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: Middling. We are not as badly off as we are in some other parts of the Commission, but we are still under the proportion that we would normally have.

The Chairman: Why is that? Is it because people do not volunteer?

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: There are two types of Brits within the EAS. There are permanent officials who will stay there throughout and there are temporary agents, as we are called, like me, who volunteered to come in, applied for a job and were selected. Relatively few of my Foreign Office colleagues have felt like volunteering to come into the EAS for a four-year period at the moment, but both the Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office and I are busy trying to encourage more colleagues to apply.

The Chairman: Presumably, much will depend on the referendum.

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: I did not want to say that, but yes.

Q94 The Chairman: That is very interesting and relevant to a lot of the things we are talking about. My impression is that the Mogherini exercise is focused increasingly on our neighbouring region rather than a global strategy and that the distinction is between those issues which threaten our security, by which I mean the EU in total, and those that do not. Is that a fair way of putting it?

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: I would not put it exactly like that. It is a global strategy because the EU, like its Member States, has global interests. Things that happen in China can have as much of an impact on the EU as things that happen in Syria, but they are different. Two things have led to a greater focus on the near neighbourhood. Fundamentally, the physical insecurity of the region and all of the events in Ukraine, Syria and Libya have directly impacted significantly on the EU and all its Member States. Therefore, we need to address more attention to that now, but it remains a global strategy, in that threats to stability and economic viability throughout the world are relevant to the EU. The previous strategy of 2003 was billed primarily as a security strategy and this is a slightly wider-ranging one. Obviously, security is the

number one preoccupation, but it is also taking more account of other political and economic impacts from the rest of the world.

Q95 The Chairman: At the outset, the Germans and French were less keen on undertaking this than some others. Is it your impression that everybody now is committed to the exercise, or would these doubts have remained?

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: I think they have been assuaged, because in June Mrs Mogherini presented a background paper to the European Council, which agreed unanimously that she should go ahead and produce a strategy to tackle the issues identified in that paper. It was quite a good paper, but it was background and not strategy itself. I would say that, now, the Member States recognise that the EU needs to get a coherent world view and some guidelines for its engagement, particularly on the security issues of the neighbourhood but also beyond.

Q96 The Chairman: You can, if you wish, switch off the recorder for my next question. Is it your impression that the shadow of the negotiation and referendum has been an inhibiting factor in Britain's contribution—I do not mean just diplomats but at ministerial level—or do you feel that at least thus far Britain has contributed in a reasonable and constructive fashion?

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: I think the latter. The prospect of a renegotiation has not had any significant impact on the UK's ability to input substantively to the strategy. The next few months will be critical for identifying what the strategy should be. There are British experts on the advisory boards and British officials have had a substantive input to the drafting of the background paper, so I do not think that should reduce our ability to influence the outcome.

Q97 Lord Dubs: May I test an idea on you? I have met British ambassadors in many countries. I thought they were all high-calibre people who gave us an incredibly informed briefing on the situation in their countries. That is the sort of access that the Foreign Office has on a day-by-day basis, and yet among the 28 there are countries that do not have the benefit of that. Is there not an imbalance in regard to those countries that have top diplomatic people and get their own information, as well as getting it through the EU system?

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: Big countries carry more weight in the world than small countries. That is true to some extent within the context of the EU. This is a slightly indirect answer. Small countries like the EAS and common foreign policy because it gives them more influence and information than they would otherwise have. There is a big market among smaller Member States for the information we can provide. We are represented in almost every single country. Very few Member States are. We as the EU are able to deliver on the ground information and influence. Apart from the UK, France and Germany, which are global players and have missions everywhere, we can supplement what those Member States can do for themselves.

Even in the case of the UK, for some countries the EU is able to provide additional valuable influence. In particular, in my previous job in Africa, there were many countries where the UK would have a one-man mission in Bamako or Liberia and the EU would have a fully-fledged mission, with the Gates programme, with lots of political intelligence, and we would share that. Therefore, we were able to enhance the UK's ability both to understand what is going on and influence it. In other countries, the UK is better informed than the EU delegation. Where I am now in the Middle East, the UK tends to have more Arabists, bigger missions and huge commercial engagement which the EU does not, so it varies from place to place.

Q98 The Chairman: You mentioned Dar es Salaam where in colonial times my wife was brought up. We were there not long ago. I noticed that the British mission shared accommodation with the EU and one other Member State. Is that a very rare phenomenon?

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: It is relatively infrequent, but I take some pride in that because I was the British deputy high commissioner in Dar es Salaam at the point we agreed to have a joint mission with the EU, the Germans and the Dutch, so reasonably like-minded people. It has been a great success.

Earl of Oxford and Asquith: But historically at odds, certainly the Dutch, Germans and British in the case of east Africa.

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: Reconciliation is always possible. We have replicated that in one or two other places. In Juba, there is an EU compound. Almost all the Member States are present on this compound, which is very sensible and efficient in a new country that came into existence. There are one or two other places where we share premises with one or two, but I would not say it has become a general practice.

Q99 Lord Risby: Can we turn to the countries that comprise north Africa? I was a governor of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy for nine years. We tried to do parliamentary capacity building and encourage civil society. If there is one theme that runs through these countries, it is that they are very statist in different ways. Some do not function very well. We have been talking about the balance between transformational and transactional, which is under discussion currently. Are you able to have adequate discussions, or is it part of your remit to talk to civil society, for example, or people not attached to the state in trying to formulate a view about the relationship?

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: It is a very large and important part of our delegation's engagement with any country to link into civil society. We used to say that the partnership between the EU and African countries is with the people, not just the Governments. Therefore, particularly where we had a big aid programme, it was very important to be able to see the benefits that our aid brought to individual people. A lot of that was delivered not just through the state, through government, but through NGOs, both international and local. Whenever I travelled in Africa, I would usually

ensure that, among my meetings with Ministers, I would see key civil society groups, not just those we would think of as traditional NGOs but wider civil society, including churches, chiefs and often local associations of a kind that were not necessarily doing health, education, gender or whatever. It was a very important part of my engagement, as well as meeting the political opposition which was a routine part of it.

As High Representative, Federica Mogherini also makes a point wherever she travels of meeting civil society as well as the Government. Sometimes, this is not very popular, but she insists that it has to be an integral part of her programme. We go to some lengths to ensure we build contacts across society as a whole through all kinds of civil society groups.

Q100 Earl of Oxford and Asquith: Carrying on with the north African countries and Middle Eastern countries, we have been hearing pretty uniform evidence from witnesses that the new security review must be more flexible and tailor-made—that is the buzzword—or there must be a more country-by-country approach. However, when you look at the countries of north Africa they are all very different. There are some like Tunisia, where it is pretty obvious what has to be done, if there is the political will. Morocco and Algeria are very different from each other. There are countries like Libya, where the UN is the driving force. When you come to develop your formulation of the security review, to what extent can you break down the review—I do not mean specific recommendations—or do you want to, into individual countries in creating greater focus for the programmes?

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: There are two answers to that. In terms of the security strategy that is being looked at, there is an ongoing debate as to exactly what the format of that strategy should be. There are some of us who think that a useful strategy is a framework that identifies interests, values and priorities in terms of overall policy approach, which you then use to govern your decisions on individual situations. There are others who like a strategy that is a set of objectives and a list of things to do. That is not my idea of a useful strategy. The 2003 strategy was in some ways very successful and lasted quite well because it took the former approach, and probably we will take that approach again.

Earl of Oxford and Asquith: You will take the framework values and priorities for all 16 countries of the neighbourhood. I do not quite understand how it will come out.

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: This is my second answer. That is for the overall security strategy. For the review of the neighbourhood policy, we had a rather rigid structure which was a one size fits all. This was what we assumed we wanted to do; here was a spectrum, and we could go to stage 1, stage 2 or stage 3. That has not responded to the diversity of the kind of neighbours we have. The new one is looking very much at having a more flexible set of partnership instruments so that we can apply the right formula to different countries. Then we will be more diversified by individual countries. That is for the neighbourhood.

Earl of Oxford and Asquith: That is very helpful to me.

Q101 Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top: The EEAS is quite a new EU institution. The Commission is very powerful and has the money. We have heard different views about the relationship between the two and how that informs the development of the strategy and how the Member States see the institutions involved.

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: You are right. The EEAS is young and to some extent is still finding its way in the world, as a five year-old might, but it did not appear out of thin air. On Africa, over the past four years, we were able to have very fruitful co-operation between the EEAS and the Commission, which held a lot of the money but which recognised, as the Member States did when they set up the EEAS, that we needed to have strategic coherence in the EU's interaction with the country. If you are dealing with country X—Tanzania or Kenya—it does not see one set of dealings with the EEAS, one set of dealings with DEVCO and a separate set of dealings with another body. They are dealing with the EU, of which there is just one. It is our job to make sure that the package we are presenting to the third country is coherent, and what has very much underpinned Cathy Ashton's Comprehensive Approach is that all our instruments and different bits of the institutions need to pull in the same direction. We were able to do that alongside the Member States. They shared the direction in which we wanted to pull. While there are always institutional tensions over who drafted what and where the decision-making process should sit on something, by and large we were able to build very harmonious relations at working level with the Member States and the end product was delivered to third country. I would argue that that enabled us to increase the influence of the EU and its Member States in Africa over the last five years.

The Middle East is turning out to be more complicated because Member States have more different interests, and the changes in the neighbourhood policy have also led to a slightly different balance of power and interest. We are working on it to build that coherence. The EU desperately needs to exert influence where its interests are affected, for example by flows of refugees and the impact on the energy market of certain decisions. The EU has its interests to protect and therefore needs to be able to present a coherent picture. By and large, what the EAS is there to do is define that coherent strategic direction, not try to take every decision about how the money should be spent. That is correctly the job of the Commission. It takes responsibility for that and has to answer to the Court of Auditors, the Parliament and Member States. Obviously, we do the diplomatic relations as well, and it is very helpful to arrive in a country saying, "This is our set of diplomatic and political priorities, and we are also spending money to reinforce your ability to do this or that". We try to make sure it is coherent, but that is where the EAS is value added and is accepted to be within the institutions, taking its own long view and strategic approach.

Q102 The Chairman: Thinking of coherence in a different context, we had a very interesting discussion earlier about sub-groups dealing with different aspects of the

neighbourhood or foreign policy generally. The big countries are likely to be involved in everything; some of the smallest ones will not be interested in a lot of things, and then you have a group of countries like Sweden, Spain and a number who fall between the two. Do you have a role in trying to ensure that those people who are interested are involved and that people are not left out in the cold, or do the Member States organise it among themselves?

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: By and large, we play an active role in ensuring all those Member States who have interests are included. On some issues, a number of the big Member States may think they need to sort it out among themselves, particularly where it segues into hard security issues where the EU does not have a security function of that kind. By and large, if there are large countries with an interest, historic or economic, in a particular area of the world, it makes no sense for the EU to develop a policy without their expertise or involvement. In Africa, when you are dealing with Mali there is no point trying to do that independently of the French.

Interestingly, in the discussion we have been having recently on Syria, every single Member State has spoken and wants its opinion to be weighed in that balance. That is not just an issue for the big countries; it affects the whole of the EU. Lithuania, Latvia, Croatia, Slovenia and so on all want their say on what our policy on Syria should be, so we include everybody.

The Chairman: Mali and Syria are on opposite ends of the spectrum, are they not?

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: Yes. For example, in Brazil, we do not have any particular crises or immediate interests, but obviously we work very closely with the Iberian countries to ensure there is a coherent policy there too, but not exclusively. The UK, Germany and France have growing economic interests in the region.

Q103 Lord Horam: You have a review being conducted by Mrs Mogherini which we hope will appear next year. We also have a separate review by the Commission on the European neighbourhood policy which may appear in December this year. I imagine that may be coincidence and that is just the way it is. How will those mesh together? How do you with your particular responsibilities take account of what is said by the Commission in its European neighbourhood policy?

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: That is a very good question, and a particularly telling one when I am talking about strategic coherence. We had two separate processes. We decided we had better review ourselves and then they realised they overlapped. It is slightly bizarre that we are producing a neighbourhood policy before we have produced our grand strategy. It should be the other way round. You have a grand strategy and then neighbourhood policy within that, but we are where we are.

The neighbourhood policy is being reviewed by the Commission and, probably in November, the Commission will put forward a proposal and say that is what it recommends the new neighbourhood policy should be. We are working internally to ensure that that will be consistent with the overall lines of the strategy, although that

will not be completed by then, but they obviously ought to be coherent, otherwise it will be a bit glaring, but we do not want to hold up one, partly because our partners are expecting this as well. Therefore, we have to satisfy their requirement. It was written into the original regulation or proposal that after 10 years, or whatever, the neighbourhood policy should be reviewed. That is fair enough, but we are a bit too far down the line to put the brakes on there.

Lord Horam: It is definitely not ideal.

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: These things just happen, so we are trying to make sure they are coherent, although the timetable is not ideal.

Q104 Lord Horam: One point a witness made to us is that there is a conflict between what one might call classical diplomacy in foreign policy affairs and geopolitical strategic view on the one hand, which is the EAS's contribution to the whole thing, and on the other hand the traditional Commission way of looking at things, which is rather more legal and looks to ways of proceeding by instruments. There is tension between the two but also the possibility of the EAS adding a bigger strategic vision to what the Commission is doing. Would you go along with that?

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: I agree with that. That is more or less what we are trying to do. I think you find the same tension in an individual Member State government. The Commission has responsibility for specific areas of economic and social policy-making: trade, obviously budget, environment and some areas of social policy. Those are the areas of competence. The EAS sits between that because a significant part of competence remains with Member States on foreign affairs, as it should, but, where we can draw it together into a more coherent whole, that is what we do. Therefore, we ensure there is coherence with the Commission and the Member States. We are learning how to do that.

When President Juncker came in, he wanted deliberately to strengthen coherence between external policy and the Commission, and therefore appointed working groups of commissioners chaired by a vice-president. Vice-President Mogherini chairs the external relations commissioners—for example Malmström on trade, development and humanitarian matters—and, when appropriate, other commissioners will join in, like home affairs when discussing migration. Mrs Mogherini's role is to draw together those different elements of the Commission practical proposals on hard policy for trade and development and the foreign policy priorities reflecting also those of the Member States. We now have a rather more effective mechanism than we had under the previous Commission to draw all of those elements together.

Q105 Lord Horam: We understand there are still some practical work-a-day problems, in that the analytical papers you produce are not easily and readily circulated to other directorates in the Commission. There is a rather laborious, bureaucratic procedure they have to go through, which means that sometimes they

do not get to where they would be quite useful; sometimes they do not get there at all, or maybe too late. Is that a problem?

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: There is a certain degree of theology or comitology involved in this. Who has the competence? There are areas of mixed competence, and therefore you have to make sure everybody who might be involved is content with what you are going to propose. The problem comes with the practices for making formal proposals from the Commission to the Council. If it is a formal recommendation of some kind, it has to be road-tested to ensure it is robust and sensible, and that takes time. In foreign affairs, how do you respond to the crisis in Syria? You cannot say, "I will give you a proposal in six months". It does not work, so we have to find ways of ensuring that we can get long papers, information papers, to Member States on critical current issues more swiftly than sometimes the formal processes allow. If we need a formal proposal to spend money or sign an agreement, it has to go back through the proper processes, so we are working on it.

Q106 Baroness Suttie: You have been wonderfully clear on the outcome you would like to see for the strategic review. Are you optimistic that it can be achieved? Other witnesses have said there is a risk that it could end up as a Christmas tree. You have been quite clear about the values-based set of priorities and a framework document. What do you think are the potential blocks to this being achieved next year?

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: I am optimistic; it is my nature to be, but for good reasons. First, the High Representative has quite a strong sense of ownership of this strategy and wants it to be coherent. Secondly, she has identified somebody to be, if you like, the pen holder, which is what also happened last time. If you have at least one person who is taking account of everything, you tend to get a lot more coherent product coming out of it than if it is the product of a committee which is Christmas-tree like.

That is not to say it will not be uncontroversial. There will be some aspects of this that are more controversial than others. As to the difference, as some see it, between interests and values, it is likely that it will take some time to find the right balance between the two. Some say, quite rightly, that they should not be set off one against the other; indeed, our interests are very closely linked to our values. That is true. Nevertheless, there are some issues, for example how you deal with President Assad, where there might be differences of opinion among Member States. How you reflect those kinds of issues, not that specific question, in the strategy is something we will need to discuss and try to get the balance right.

Q107 The Chairman: You mentioned President Assad. I think everybody would agree that he is a bad man, but a more difficult choice is Turkey. We used to take quite a high moral tone about the way in which the Turks conducted their internal affairs and the standards they needed to meet in order to qualify and so on. I do not think Mrs Merkel is going on about those when she goes to Ankara at the moment.

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: That is a good example. You could have cited possibly Egypt as well as one where the interests and values may pull in slightly different directions. That is something we can agree only collectively among EU Member States as to where the right balance is. That is why we sometimes spend long hours in committees trying to identify the right balance in these very difficult cases.

The Chairman: It is a difficult issue, but could I press you a little further? When one is dealing with Egypt, for instance, there is not the kind of immediate pressure that is present in the case of Turkey. To what extent do you think that in the case of Turkey Mrs Merkel, or any other head of government, is consulting and co-ordinating with partners, or is this so sharp and urgent that the head of government goes his or her own way?

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: Over the last two years, it has become apparent to many Member States that you cannot get what you want if you just do it on your own. That is why Mrs Merkel went to Turkey after the European Council had agreed unanimously a package to support Turkey because of the refugee situation. Therefore, there is a recognition that you have to do this together with your European partners; you cannot do it alone. We all know that within the European Council some people carry more weight than others, but it was the European Council that agreed to come up with that package to support Turkey.

Q108 The Chairman: One thing has come as a surprise to us on this visit. Last night, with Angus Lapsley but subsequently, reference has been made to the influence of the European Parliament in this sphere, of which I do not think we had taken very much account. Do you see the European Parliament as a significant player, and how does it make its influence felt? It must be rather diffuse, but how does it bring its influence to bear?

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: I will give you the answer off the record, if I may, because it is quite a sensitive issue.

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG continued off the record.

The Chairman: You have given us a tremendous meeting.

Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG: You asked some interesting questions.

The Chairman: Thank you very much for coming at short notice. It has been most interesting. I am very grateful. We will certainly observe your discretion.