



Oral evidence: [Costs and benefits of EU membership for the UK's role in the world](#),

HC 545

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Members present: Crispin Blunt (Chair), Mr John Baron, Stephen Gethins, Mr Mark Hendrick, Daniel Kawczynski, Nadhim Zahawi

Questions 226-266

Witness: **Baroness Ashton of Upholland**, former High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission, gave evidence.

Q226 Chair: Welcome to this session of the Foreign Affairs Committee's evidence taking on the costs and benefits of EU membership, and the implications for our role in the world. Baroness Ashton, thank you very much indeed for coming to give evidence to us. It is now a year, or roughly that period, since you stepped down. How would you assess the performance of the European External Action Service so far?

Baroness Ashton: Thank you very much for inviting me. Any new organisation or institution—and this was the first one that had been established in the European context for 50 years—needs a period of time to ensure that it beds down effectively. I spent the first year preparing for the launch of the new Service, then four years—including a review—trying to establish its presence both in the world and, in a sense, with the member states. I think that some of the successes that we had demonstrated the value of member states choosing to co-ordinate their policies, and this is an intergovernmental institution as much as anything else. One can project forward and see the possibility, should member states choose to develop and strengthen its work, for it to be an added benefit to member states' work.

Q227 Chair: Let me go to that question, then. What do you think it will look like in 20 years' time?

Baroness Ashton: That very much depends—

Chair: How about what you think it will look like, and what do you think that it should look like?

Baroness Ashton: I think it depends very much on how far member states recognise its potential value in being able both to put forward the views of 28 nations on the ground, and to represent some of the external issues that are important to countries. Delegations are

different from embassies. They do work on external issues, such as support for our efforts on climate change, work on supporting the trade negotiations that take place, and so on—issues that are either fully or partly delegated by countries into the European context. As that develops and grows, my hope would be that it will be a service to be relied on by all countries.

Inevitably, given the Service's presence in just over 190 places in the world, very few member states actually have a presence in all those countries. In some cases the delegations are in places where there are only three or four member states—usually Britain, and France, Germany and perhaps Spain would be other examples. In very rare cases you have the kind of coverage that you would expect from all 28—in China, Russia and so on—but not in many places. So the benefit of the Service for some nations is being able to represent a strong view of Europe in places where not everyone is represented; for others it is about giving them the chance to put forward a European perspective.

Now, you may project forward and say that that will grow and grow, and that as countries become more confident in or more happy with what the Service is doing—its direction comes largely from the Foreign Affairs Council, where all nations agree the common policy, which is then sent out as instruction—it could become stronger and more relevant for nations to say, “Well, we are comfortable to let it do that.”

You may also project forward and say that over time countries will decide that they want the Service to do only a few specific objectives, of which I have given trade as one example. That may still be true. But things will depend very much on its performance and on the direction of travel that countries feel is increasingly important in the issues that they are trying to address worldwide.

Q228 Chair: Do you think that we will see smaller countries in particular taking savings measures by closing missions and simply defaulting to the External Action Service over the next 20 years? That would be a normal economy to take if you look at the pressure that our Foreign Office is under.

Baroness Ashton: I was very clear with member states that we were not a substitute for what they did, in the sense that the EU delegations do not do consular work, and it would be a very big decision to decide that that is what they should do. The Service is not attempting to do the bilateral work of individual nations.

What we supported was economies of scale. For example, in some countries you might have a building that houses 10 or 11 different member states doing their work, with a smaller EU delegation doing collaborative work on behalf of everyone. Those kinds of economies are a better way of nations deciding that they perhaps do not want to be as involved in some countries. In my time in office we made agreements with Spain, for example. The Spanish were looking at rationalisation of their embassies, so in some places we had an agreement to have joint space, which was more cost-effective, and shared services and so on. That kind of work is important anyway in keeping costs down.

Q229 Chair: How successful has the Service been in drawing together the EU's range of external relations instruments? I am thinking in particular about the development programme or the humanitarian programme. Again, what do you think will happen? Is there a natural progression of these things being much more effectively integrated, so that within 20 years' time we can expect to see them operating together?

Baroness Ashton: One of the big discussions before the Service was set up, and certainly at the beginning, was on that relationship—how the spending on development fits with the broader objectives of foreign policy. In addition, while for many development is rightly about the alleviation of poverty and support for economies and countries, there is also the question of the priorities and issues that are of enormous importance to member states. That is obvious right now in what is happening with the challenge of migration.

How we resolved that was to say that different decisions needed to be taken. The strategic decisions—where money should go, in terms of the breadth of spending and which countries should be recipients—should involve the people involved in foreign policy, and certainly should involve delegations, which used not to happen in the old-style delegations. Delegations fed into development decision making so that it fitted together more effectively. They, after all, are on the ground and have a greater understanding of what is going on in the country, at least in part if not in whole. So we were engaged in the strategic discussions.

When it came to decisions about, literally, which bit of money went to which project, that was done by the Development Commissioner and the Development Commission staff, who were experts on how you do that. So we tried to get a better marriage between development and foreign policy. I think that is probably about the right balance, but again, I think it needs to bed down and be assessed as to whether it is working as efficiently as it might.

There was an advantage, because I chaired the Development Ministers meeting, as well as the foreign policy meeting and Defence Ministers—I chaired three Councils. That meant you did at least have some level of continuity that the services were providing: the secretariat, the briefings and so on. The Development Commissioner would not only attend the Development Ministers meeting but would, if need be, come along to the Foreign Affairs Council. You had that more integrated approach, which I think was better.

On humanitarian aid, the commissioner concerned would, again, come to the Foreign Affairs Council any time there was an issue where her work—Kristalina Georgieva's work—was important in the context of what we were doing. I remember very early on, for example, when the Haiti earthquake happened, she was very much part of the discussions at the Foreign Affairs Council and later, of course, at the Development Ministers meeting, where they were discussing how you deal with both the short-term and the long-term implications of such a disaster for such a poor country. That, again, seemed to work reasonably well. I think there is still more work to do in terms of bringing those internal issues more closely together with a service that was not a Commission service, nor indeed an intergovernmental service, but actually a bit of a hybrid. It will, I think, take time to see how that should work more effectively, but certainly it could.

Q230 Mr Baron: Baroness Ashton, welcome. To be devil's advocate for a second, you did not have an easy brief to kick off with. The External Action Service occupies quite a unique institutional space outside the Commission and outside the Council of Ministers. You almost had—I will not say tension—a headwind to face from the start and early teething problems. There have been successes, which I want to come on to in a second question, if I may, but just putting the successes and the pros and cons to one side for a moment, do you think the structure of the External Action Service is best suited to its purpose within the EU?

Baroness Ashton: It is a good question. It is worth remembering that the gestation period of this whole project was a very long one. It came out of discussions that people were having about something called a constitution, which you may remember, and then became

part of the Lisbon treaty. I have always believed that it was a sensible next discussion, based on the fact that the collaboration on trade had been pretty effective and that the strength of the economic power of the 27, then 28 nations could be efficiently projected. Other people may have had additional reasons. By the time it came into being, we were in the beginnings of a very difficult economic crisis, so creating something new in that headwind was not easy. It was very important to be very cost-effective, and we were, in the main, amalgamating existing and different services into one. I was very mindful of that.

Also, the politicians around the table who had been passionate about producing this had, in the main, moved on. You had people who had different views; some were very passionate, and some were perhaps less so. They were faced with the creation of something that was one line in the treaty in article 27.3, “the High Representative shall be assisted by a European External Action Service.” My brief was to get unanimity from all member states, from the Commission and a majority in the Parliament, and to do it as quickly as possible.

Mr Baron: Not an easy task.

Baroness Ashton: No, and for some it was a task they would have liked me not to manage in time. There was a sense in which we had to try to find a structure that would make the most possible sense and that was as cost-effective as possible, bringing together as much as possible in ways that would make sense, rather than people working in—I won’t say silos; that would be unfair on them—eight different buildings across Brussels, so that it is harder to communicate. We had to turn Commission delegations on the ground into something different on the basis of the Lisbon treaty and merge three different roles—the Commissioner, the High Representative in the intergovernmental sense, and the rotating presidency—into one. So the structure is a reflection of our best guess about how you pull all that together.

You could not start from scratch. You could do some of the things you might have done, because you did not have the money. There was a need to make sure that member states, the Commission and the Parliament felt it pretty much reflected what they would not necessarily love, but at least like. So decisions about how many member state diplomats there should be, how many people should be from existing institutions, the levels of management and so on were all part of that big conversation, which was a negotiation. A four-way negotiation took place through the Spanish presidency with different representatives from different bits of the structure of the EU to try and achieve that.

We then reviewed it. I wrote a review saying I would streamline a lot of things slightly differently now, but it was the best structure for what we wanted to produce at that time.

Q231 Mr Baron: May I drill down on that slightly? There have been successes: Iran and the western Balkans. Iran was a particularly notable success. I have long believed that we should talk rather than just use sanctions and so forth, and you played a key role there. There is also a general frustration that trying to create a coherent strategic objective, and to get the forces deployed on the ground to achieve it, has not been easy. The 2014 ruling by the EU Court of Auditors, for example, was critical in part in that respect. Looking forward, do you think the External Action Service is heading in the right direction? What would you do differently from what is being done at the moment? This is relevant to subsequent questions when it comes to the UK’s role within this and the role of the EAS relative to the FCO.

Baroness Ashton: I am over a year out of office, so my knowledge of the detail of what is going on is—

Mr Baron: But you must keep an eye on things a little bit.

Baroness Ashton: I don't keep an eye on things. I left office and I believe that, having been a Minister, when you leave office, you leave office. I got used to transferring literally within minutes from one to another. I take a great interest in foreign policy, but I am not watching where and how the EAS is operating. I can imagine some of the things that are happening right now, which of course will be very much linked to the discussions in the EU about migration issues and the causes of the refugees moving so rapidly towards Europe—the issues that are affecting what I would broadly call our neighbourhood.

In terms of where I would be focusing—which is not to say that it is not where they are focusing—it would be on looking at how we support the processes to try to find a peace in Syria; the processes that will support the displaced people both internally in Syria and in refugee camps in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon; and the fragility that you see in the nations that, before the refugees arrived, were already suffering substantially.

Q232 Mr Baron: Very briefly, my final question: you are citing different examples of where we need to improve things. I completely agree with you, but can I bring you back to the central point? When it came to the creation of the External Action Service, did the Lisbon treaty create a structure in which where the state of mind of a coherent external strategy simply did not exist? Are we going to have this continual friction going forward?

Baroness Ashton: I don't know what the friction is that you refer to. The Lisbon treaty did two things: it created the post that was the amalgam, and it talked about the creation of a service. There was then the interpretation of the Lisbon treaty, which member states, the Commission and the Parliament had already begun to think about, although not to do anything about until the treaty went through, because it was by no means certain it would go through. They had ideas of what they thought would work, but in any organisation of any size involving any number of players, when you create something new you are inevitably going to have to establish how that is going to fit into the images, the design and the expectations of different countries. They are by definition not going to be quite the same, just as I was not necessarily the person that people expected to be doing this. I describe it as being a bit like when you read the book and then see the film, and the person in the film doesn't look like the person you thought would be in it from the book.

Mr Baron: Not at all!

Baroness Ashton: Well, it felt like that. Some nations or institutions had particular views that they wanted to see this move further and faster. Other countries were very clear that they saw it as a useful additional support to what they were doing. Some were more sceptical about whether it could achieve things. Some Foreign Ministers were worried about what it would mean for their own position, because they were in prominent positions in their own country, and looking for even higher office eventually in some cases. So you had to create something that would meet the expectations, but also give people a sense of relief that you were not trying to do something that would be against their wishes.

When you are confronted with the fact that you have to get a vote on your proposal in which all nations—there were 27 then—will, hand on heart, say yes, you do a lot of work in the background to try to establish what would be best. That is why it is so important to keep reviewing it. I did one review, and I was pretty open about the things that structurally I would change, having tried it out. Nobody had ever done this before, so you are trying something out and trying to do it as best you can with what you know and with the advice you get, but it

will need to change and flatten and be shaped differently as time goes on, to respond to the needs that the European countries have.

Q233 Stephen Gethins: Thanks for coming before us today. You mentioned your interaction with the member states. I would be interested to hear, from your experiences—I know they're a year old now—how you made sure that you were not duplicating, or how you interacted with and complemented the Foreign Offices of member states. In particular, it would be interesting to hear about your interaction with, say, a bigger member state such as the United Kingdom. Did it differ from that with a smaller member state—Ireland, for example?

Baroness Ashton: Well, I was British—

Stephen Gethins: And still are.

Baroness Ashton: I still am, and very proud of it. This was not a job I campaigned for. The British asked me to do it, alongside the other member states, so I was very mindful that this needed to work for all the countries, including nations that had a long and proud history of foreign policy, had embassies all over the world and did not perhaps have the same needs as some of the smaller nations; they had, if you like, access to everybody in the world. One of the things to bear in mind is that smaller nations, or nations that have had less experience on the foreign policy stage, do not necessarily access some of the top leaders in the same way as the other nations do. So it was about trying to find something that was going to be by definition complementary.

To some extent, I relied for that on the Foreign Affairs Council. There were all the Foreign Ministers, and I would put forward ideas of what we might do. It was their job, through their permanent representatives and then in the Council itself, to establish what they thought that should be. We were leading in the sense of being the proposers of ideas, but we were also—I was very clear about this—the chair, the co-ordinator and the implementer of the policy of the member states. It was crucial that that was understood, because the strength of what you did was that when you put forward your views on human rights or whatever the issue was, you were going with the strength of 28 countries behind you who had agreed that position. That is very important for the recipient bodies. The difference was that we could do things that had that strength, provided it had been agreed that that was what we should do. Individual nations could do it themselves, but they were often very happy, particularly on issues such as human rights, for us to play a prominent and lead role.

We could co-ordinate. For example, when a nation went through dramatic change, which we saw quite often in that period of time, one of the things that would happen was that they were unable to deal with many people coming to deal with them, because they were at best interim Governments. One of the things we were able to do with, if you like, the permission of member states, was co-ordinate a bit more. We could find out what was needed and help to establish what kind of support was needed, and work out how we would offer support to countries such as Egypt or, in the beginning, to Libya, where incidentally we were doing a lot of work on border security. That kind of collaborative approach, where you are able to pull together different sources or take issues forward on behalf of all and give greater strength, was something that, in my experience, all countries welcomed.

Q234 Stephen Gethins: You mentioned Libya. We as a Committee are debating and discussing something that a number of western European nations would concede they haven't got right recently: long-term commitment and post-conflict reconstruction. Where do you

think the Action Service has played a positive role, and where do you think it could play a positive role in future, maybe drawing from the experience in Iraq or Afghanistan?

Baroness Ashton: One thing I often say about the European Union as a collective is that it is like a tanker, not a yacht: it takes time to move, but when it moves, it is very good at sticking with it for the long term. The ability and willingness of the Commission and of the member states to put long-term strategies in play is really important. Before I left, we did a 10-year plan for Afghanistan. For Libya, there will be a long-term plan—we were already working on it, and I am sure that that has continued.

The challenge in Libya was partly that if you take in people to support a nation—if you are doing border security, for example, you are taking in police officers, customs officers and so on—they cannot go into a country unless there is a Government to welcome them, and they cannot go into a country where there is no ability to protect them. A lot of the issues with producing a long-term plan are also about trying to help the country to which you are going be able to do the things it needs to do to allow that to happen. We did a lot of work on that kind of collaborative approach for different nations, because it is a great way of using resources more efficiently. That is true in defence as well, by the way. It is about using resources better.

Q235 Stephen Gethins: Are there any areas that you think we should look at where there were particular successes or failures in that regard?

Baroness Ashton: Look at what we did around Somalia and the collaboration there. I won't say the defeat of piracy, but the move to reduce piracy off the coast of Somalia by 95% was a European mission. It was mission Atalanta, and it was run from Northwood in the UK. It was a very successful mission, but it wasn't just a military mission. That was an important part of it, involving 12 or 13 countries at different times, always run by Britain from headquarters and led in the field by different flagships—we took the decision to get rid of the boats on the beaches and so on. There was also a huge amount of work to offer alternative employment to the young boys who were persuaded to become pirates, right the way through to supporting the African Union troops who were clearing the way for the Government to restore order after 20 years of civil war. That is a very good example, and there are others. It is about that bringing together of different things, which means that you can have more effect.

Q236 Stephen Gethins: What you just said on post-conflict reconstruction, where obviously you have 28 member states that will by and large and say the same thing, was fascinating. You mentioned climate change, which is quite interesting, as you would have 28 member states with distinct views. How did you manage to work on that? It was quite interesting when you mentioned that earlier on.

Baroness Ashton: I didn't have the job of actually pulling them all together, because the Climate Change Commissioner did that, but we did things on the ground. Take small island states and the challenge for some of the countries in the Pacific islands. We were able to work with them to try to understand what their issues were going to be. In some cases, it was simply that the water was rising, but many countries—over 100—suffer from the consequences of climate change, such as drought and floods, and we need to find ways to help them in the longer term.

When the floods hit Pakistan badly four years ago, for example, one difficulty was whether to rebuild small communities exactly where they had been before when all the longer-term thinking about the climate implied that they would be vulnerable from now on, but moving whole communities is not easy. For all sorts of reasons, people rightly want to stay where they are, so we did a lot of work with those countries and with communities on understanding the implications and effects of climate change, trying to help them to work out whether flood defences sufficient to protect those communities could be built, whether simply making a small move could make a difference and so on. These were not areas that had traditionally had a problem, and they were now finding themselves in that position.

So there was that sort of work where climate change is creating an impact, which has to be linked to where you put your development support and aid and linked back to how we approached the whole question of what went on recently in Paris—I saw Nick Stern clapping away there. This is all part of the same thing. More than anything, it is about pulling everything together so that we have a much bigger picture. You can operate more effectively if—we used to call it joined-up Government when I was a Minister, but I now call it a comprehensive approach—you interweave all the different elements of what you are doing so that the response you give is better and, I would argue, more cost-effective.

Q237 Daniel Kawczynski: Briefly, on your point about Libya, you said that we cannot send in customs officers and other experts unless there is a Government, but how would you respond to some people's argument that it is a lack of support for the House of Representatives and the Tobruk Government that has led to the protracted situation in Libya? We are being told that we need to wait for a unity Government, but what about that initial support for the House of Representatives? Why wasn't it more robust?

Baroness Ashton: On what has happened in Libya in the last year or so, you will understand that I am not as familiar with the detail, but let me go back to what happened initially. In the wake of what was already a set of rather dramatic changes, we saw Libya go through a dramatic change that had different implications. This was a country that was quite strong economically compared with what had happened elsewhere. It had a big industrial base and was perhaps in need of diversification of its industry. What it lost was a lot of the support service that went alongside that, and it lost a lot of workers who were able to provide some pretty basic things for the country. The example that is often quoted is that of the Egyptians bakers who all went home. I think a million Egyptians were employed in Libya at that point, but they went home. By the way, that also had implications for the Egyptian economy, because they were no longer sending money home; they went home without jobs. There were lots of ripple and knock-on effects.

When the interim Governments were established and the Transitional National Council was very much in Benghazi—I was there during this period of time—they were not so keen to be seen as the ones who were taking over Libya. We went through this period of quite a lot of flux around who was actually going to come into office and how. In that period, which was when I was in office, the challenge was in part—this is no criticism of the Libyan people trying to do this work—that institutions cannot just walk into a country and say, “We have come to help, and we have brought hundreds of people with us”. That is for all the obvious reasons: both for the protection of your own people and because that is not what you do. It is about trying to find ways in which you can offer support when there is no mechanism to do so, and particularly in countries where you do not have, as we have here, a well established civil service—the bureaucracies, in the best sense of the word, that exist—it is much more

difficult to do things. I think that the UN, in particular, struggled to do that. Subsequent to that, a lot of work went into trying to support the bringing together of the different groups and, as you have described it, some kind of unity Government. Bernardino León, who used to work for me, was taken by the UN to do his work there.

I do not pretend that I can now see the detail of all that. But, ultimately, my point remains that it is extremely difficult to try to support countries where you need to be working alongside those who have the authority if you are doing particular pieces of work. It is not like bringing in food; that is a lot easier. You can usually get agreements locally to do that, and so on, and many experts far greater than me can talk about that. But trying to do broader pieces of work when one huge institutional framework, as the EU was, is talking to a country, is very, very difficult.

Q238 Mr Hendrick: It is nice to see you, Baroness Ashton. When you appeared before the Committee in 2011, you characterised EU external relations as a multiplier for British foreign policy.

Baroness Ashton: That was very clever.

Mr Hendrick: As you know, in order to get any agreement you need unanimity across the Foreign Affairs Council. How do you characterise, in retrospect, the difference between multiplying British foreign policy and having a situation where you have to get the agreement of 28 member states, which in many cases is the lowest common denominator?

Baroness Ashton: I do not accept the premise that it is the lowest common denominator, and I will tell you why I do not accept that premise. With 28 countries, on any issue that we are confronted with or any issue that we wish to address—our relationship with a major power such as India or China, or our role in the South China Sea versus what we do in the context of Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and so on—there will be people within that 28 who have geopolitical expertise of the issue. So on relations with Russia, there are nations around the table that have long histories and knowledge.

In all those situations, in the first discussions that took place between the permanent representatives and the team from the External Action Service—the chair of the meeting of the permanent representatives was an EAS person appointed by me—there would first be a discussion about what that response might look like. For many countries, they would look to the expertise that existed in their colleagues, and they would look to what their colleagues who understood the issue well felt was necessary and appropriate. That does not mean that those who took the strongest view always got their way, by any means, but it did mean that you did not go down, in my view, to lowest common denominator. You aimed for highest common factor.

In the discussions at the Foreign Affairs Council, there was never a vote in five years. I am not even sure if there is a voting procedure; as president of it, I was never aware of one. But my role was to seek a strong EU position—because a weak EU position in the world, or in the country or the issue that you are dealing with, was less good—and to do that by having the Ministers really drill down and address the issue.

In that context, the British Foreign Ministers who were there—it was usually the Foreign Secretary—were involved, animated and determined, and were in no circumstances going to be simply rolled over by the others; as, indeed, were most of the other countries, who felt, with the breadth of their foreign policy knowledge, that they had an interest in all these issues. It is true to say that on some issues the British would be very much in a

leadership role around the table in the things that they felt were necessary and important to do. So I do not accept the premise of lowest common denominator. The British, Germans, French, Italians, Spanish, Lithuanians and Estonians have no interest in that, nor do the others. It was about trying to find a strong position that also fitted with what was inevitably a level of domestic consideration—what was important for your nation and what your electorate would feel about an issue.

Q239 Mr Hendrick: You describe a scenario in which there is a great deal of common purpose among the 28 member states. You can imagine that in those circumstances, you are actually making the whole better than the sum of the parts. You are getting added value from the extra number of member states, rather than it being an obstacle to progress. That is positive, and I am glad to hear it, but when there are member states that do not want any action or are opposed to what for the most part would be considered a common purpose—maybe a significant minority—do they not drag the feet of what should be effective action?

Baroness Ashton: There were very few issues. I cannot think of any, actually.

Q240 Mr Hendrick: Can I give you an example of one? We have just talked about Libya. France and Britain obviously wanted to take military action. The remaining member states were not prepared to go as far. Did that not pose certain problems within the Foreign Affairs Council?

Baroness Ashton: It didn't. With the beginnings of the External Action Service and the separate meetings of Defence Ministers, there is not a kind of European military position, in my view. There is a lot more need to collaborate on military issues in research and development, and I can come on to that. Nations making sovereign decisions to use their military resources do it individually, or increasingly—and in the future, inevitably, always—in collaboration with others. The discussions in the Foreign Affairs Council were much more about what work the EU needs to be doing, if military action is taken by some nations, to ensure that the outcome of all this is a more stable country.

My work was much more involved in what I call the tanker part of this, which is that you need long-term plans for how you are going to support countries—let's not take Libya as an example, but in general—to be stable, to be able to exploit their economies effectively and to ensure that in the context of any kind of war and destruction, you are thinking about reconstruction and so on.

The discussions that took place in Paris, as you recall, under the chairmanship of President Sarkozy, involved the United States and the UN. The decisions about any form of military action were taken there. If you recall, others took decisions, because they were not engaged in military action, to replace the gaps left when the military moved from one theatre to another. They are never easy conversations, because these decisions, as you have experienced, are incredibly difficult to make. For many of the crises in our neighbourhood or beyond, decisions about how we can best support and help are difficult and challenging—whatever words and adjectives you want to use—but require people to really think, “What's the best thing that we can do? How do we support what is also by definition going slightly into the unknown?”

Q241 Mr Hendrick: During your time as High Representative, how closely aligned did you feel the EU's foreign policy priorities were with those of the UK?

Baroness Ashton: I never felt that they were out of alignment. The issues that Britain has traditionally wanted to make sure are covered in foreign policy still remain. For example, you will recall that Britain has a strong interest in what happens in Pakistan, and its relationships with India and the Commonwealth are important in this context. It also has strong links with the US; there is the alignment of policy with the United States. We were in touch with the US every day, of course.

It is more that, for Britain, there would be focal points in the discussions where they would want to push forward on our relationship with a particular country. If we were discussing Afghanistan, you would expect the British to be very much at the forefront of discussions on long-term strategy for Afghanistan. It is not that it was out of alignment, but more that—as we saw with a number of countries—there would be very strong issues where one would rely on the British to be constantly pushing in the 28 and putting them on the agenda. They decided the agenda; we drafted it and they would decide between them whether it was right or they wanted to add new issues. There are issues that are going to be on every agenda, but one relies on key member states, of which Britain is one, to keep pushing on issues that, with everything else going on, can be in danger of not being as prominent in the EU as they should be.

Q242 Mr Hendrick: In that case, how effective and influential do you think the UK is in affecting the decisions of the Foreign Affairs Council? You mentioned Afghanistan. Can you think of other examples where Britain made its weight felt?

Baroness Ashton: I think in a lot of the discussions on Syria, and in a lot of the discussions on Iraq and the Middle East. Britain also made sure that we did not forget some of the difficulties we faced in Africa. In all the neighbourhood issues, it is not that Africa sank down the agenda—I do not mean that negatively; as you can imagine, you have only seven hours of debate and you have conflict in Syria, Iraq, Egypt and so on—but Britain ensured that issues were not forgotten. William Hague's campaign against what happens to women in many conflicts was a really important one. He used the opportunity of being with the 27 others to raise that and get support, and he did get it. So the influence is very much there.

I would add that it was no accident that they wanted a British person to set up the foreign policy service, knowing that my head of office would therefore be British and we would approach it from a British point of view, if I can put it like that.

Q243 Mr Hendrick: Can you think of any occasion when the UK was marginalised in the Foreign Affairs Council, or when the outcome did not align with British foreign policy?

Baroness Ashton: No. I can think of the discussion with Britain and France wanting to change the nature of the sanctions regime on Syria to allow for the possibility of being able to arm people in Syria, should they wish. That was a very long debate between countries. It was a very good debate, because people were genuinely searching for what the right response on that ought to be. In the end, the decision was taken to change the sanctions regime, because that is a unanimous decision to enable the countries that wish to do so.

Q244 Mr Hendrick: Don't you think the length of that debate, with things changing as they did on the ground in Syria, very much affected, or perhaps partly resulted in, the mess in Syria that we have today?

Baroness Ashton: I don't think you can blame a seven-hour debate as opposed to a five-hour debate.

Q245 Mr Hendrick: I wouldn't blame that—I do not mean the length of debate in the chamber, but the time it took from the outbreak of the conflict in Syria to where we are now, years on. I am suggesting that perhaps it contributed to the situation.

Baroness Ashton: When you look back at the beginnings of what was happening in Syria, I don't think there was any way to predict exactly what was going to happen—certainly not the outcome we have now. Arming people on the ground—giving them weapons—has to be done within the approach that has been agreed not just with the EU but under the UN. You don't hand over weapons unless you know their end point. That is the British position as well as the European position. So one of the biggest issues in discussing what best to do to support people was knowing where your guns and weapons would end up. That was part of the broader debate.

Q246 Mr Hendrick: You can never know who is going to win a battle and, therefore, who gets the weapons after that battle has been won. That goes without saying, surely. Many of us were calling for weapons to be handed over.

Baroness Ashton: Yes, and there was honestly a huge debate on whether or not to do so, and on who to arm and how to arm. There were different viewpoints about how best to support people in the circumstances and whether there were already enough weapons in the country; whether adding more weapons was actually going to find a peaceful solution; whether arming one particular group would be the best way forward, and so on. All of those were genuine and honest debates. I was merely saying that one of the factors at play was knowing—if someone is defeated and their weapons are taken, it is a different thing—whether the weapons that were handed over may end up with other groups because they are handed over to those other groups. I am not accusing anybody of anything, but it was one of the factors in the debate.

At the beginnings of the conflict, our main focus was on trying to get President Assad to stop allowing his people to be killed. At the beginnings of the debate, it was very much a UN process, which you will remember started in Geneva, of trying to bring everybody together, and there was a strong desire to find a peaceful solution that didn't end up in a civil war. That was what everybody was focused on, so the debate about weaponry was part of that debate. Would this aid that process? By not doing it, would we end up in a worse situation?

Q247 Mr Hendrick: In terms of the operation of the Foreign Affairs Council, the fact that you had 28 or 27 member states sat there saying, "If, but, why, wherefore" isn't getting a decision one way or the other; it is prevarication to the outside world.

Baroness Ashton: When you deliberate in Parliament on these decisions, what you find in any grouping of politicians, I find, is real sense of trying to work out what is the best way to go forward. It is not prevarication; it is a genuine debate about how best we support the return of peace to a country that clearly needs to move forward in a different direction and about somebody who needs to leave office, and so on. How do you do that? How do you do it when you are sitting and looking at it three years ago, before the situation was as it is now? The focus at that time was much more on how we try to get people around the table and get this sorted out. If you remember, Kofi Annan was leading a process at that time.

There were then lots of discussions about which countries needed to engage with it, as there still are now. Post the negotiations with Iran, is there a role for them? What is happening with Saudi Arabia, and so on? Lots of different debates and discussions are going on. All I would say is that I don't think it is prevarication, but I don't think there is an exact science that says you can look at an issue as difficult as what was happening in Syria—a country moving into chaos—and work out necessarily what was right. In hindsight, yes, perhaps people will say that, on reflection, maybe we should have done this or that, but at the time, in all honesty, I think people were really struggling with what was the best thing to try to do.

Q248 Stephen Gethins: My question is on these points, knowing what you know now. You mentioned Libya earlier, and I rather liked your analogy of the External Action Service being a tanker—once it is pointing in the right direction, it is there in the long term. Clearly that didn't work in Libya, which is not entirely the fault of the External Action Service—the UK, France and others take the blame, too—but what do you think went wrong in Libya? What lessons should be learned? Do you think, given the tanker analogy, that the EU is a better vehicle for long-term strategy in such areas?

Baroness Ashton: I actually said that the EU was a tanker. I was trying to make the EAS a bit more like a yacht that moves around a bit quicker. When you look back at what was going on in what we call the southern neighbourhood, you see that it was very difficult then to have any sense of what was happening and why. I know people can now point to moments when—ah, ha!—it should have been obvious, but it wasn't.

We were very careful in talking with all the countries and with the US and others to see whether, in setting up something new, we had missed a way to deal with or understand it. I don't think that we did any more than, as we relied on information coming from the 28, other countries did. Things were, to a large extent, unexpected.

There are two or three lessons I would take from it. I did this later but would like to have done it faster. It is what I call economics means politics. When the young man in Tunisia sparked—literally—the change, it was an economic issue; he couldn't feed his family and he was being harassed. Economics means politics is crucial. You need to recognise the importance that people feel—as everybody in this country would—that it is not just about wanting democratic freedom; it is about wanting your children to go to school, have a job, a future and somewhere to live. Those are all the things that, in my experience, everybody in the whole world wants, when you ask them; it is the same stuff.

We needed to move on, probably getting economic support in quicker, particularly in countries where there are large populations of young people who have not been given that opportunity in educational or work terms. That is true in Egypt. You have quite a large number of stunted people in Egypt outside the main cities. In Tunisia you have a large number of people who do not have the benefits of education.

I developed that phrase and used it to develop what we called a taskforce of taking in the huge investment banks. I took 100 chief executives to Egypt and 97 to Burma—Myanmar—to try to help support the development of the countries. We always need to keep in mind that economics is a big driver of political change and that politics on its own is not enough.

Secondly, we need to find a way to deal with this problem. You cannot just arrive in a country and say, "We have come to help." You can do that as a Minister, but you can't expect

professional people working in particular careers or professions to be able to do that. The police mission we have in Afghanistan to train the police force is very well thought out and we take police officers from all over Europe.

There were many countries that wanted our civil servants from across Europe, because they wanted help. They wanted judges who could come and explain to them how to set up a judicial system or to help it. We did a lot of that. I did that, by the way, as a Justice Minister here, in what was then Constitutional Affairs, with Romania and Bulgaria. We took judges on a trip to talk to judges about how the rules of precedent worked and so on.

There are lots of different things that people want, but you cannot just take those people in to countries that essentially are not secure for them and ask them to stay there. We have to find a way to address that. I don't think that is just in the EU; I think it is probably a UN issue, too. At the moment it is a big problem that you cannot do it, understandably. You don't always have people in power. They may be there and sitting in offices acting as, but they will often say to you, "I can't take that decision because I'm not going to be here in six months." "Well, you have to take the decision because you are there." But they do not want to. That is number one, but I don't have a solution to that yet. It needs to be really thought about. Those are the two things that I would especially point to.

Q249 Mr Baron: As an aside, I think you were absolutely right with your caution on Syria. As anyone who has travelled in the area knows, the idea in those early days that you could arm certain rebels but not others and not expect arms to fall into the hands of others did not recognise the realities on the ground.

May I us bring back to UK influence vis-à-vis the External Action Service? Let me be devil's advocate in one brief question. In general terms and not looking at specific examples, isn't the development of a distinct EU diplomatic power, because of the EU's budget and powers, a long-term counterweight to any country's ability to represent its interests abroad, particularly the UK, as one of the big three within the EU? Isn't that a fact of life that has long been recognised by those who support such developments and admitted by diplomats who do not?

Baroness Ashton: First of all, the reason for the word "distinct" is that it should not do what member states are doing, because if you are duplicating, it is a waste of money. Secondly, because it is EU, it has got a different flavour to it. Taking the example of trade, the EU negotiated—I negotiated—the deal with South Korea. It is a very good deal, which has been very beneficial for this country, and on the back on that, British Ministers have gone there with businesspeople to make bilateral agreements. So you can argue that the EU sometimes gives a framework in which the bilateral operation of individual countries—which are also, by the way, competing with each other in that context—can work, and that it is not a duplication.

It was one of the jobs of the European Council, or the Foreign Affairs Council—this was their job, not mine. They set up this thing, in a sense. For them, it is about how to make it distinct. I used to say, very simplistically, that when you go into an embassy anywhere in the world, whether it is a German, British or French embassy, you know which country you are in, because there will be artefacts and things. How will you know whether you are in a European delegation? I did that in the EAS by inviting member states to give me things to put in it.

Q250 Mr Baron: You don't think that an enormous EU flag on the outside would give it away?

Baroness Ashton: Well, that's part of it, but it is more the flavour, because it must be about something that is different. The challenge for the countries, as the Service, which is now four years old, moves forward—you will hopefully see this most effectively in a few years to come—is, what is distinct and different? What can it do on the ground? I can think of some examples.

When I went to visit Presidents, Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers across the world, I went as a representative of all 28. In China, I would meet the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister, but I would also meet the Defence Minister, because I had the remit of being able to talk about aspects of defence issues on behalf of the 28 Defence Ministers. There are not many individual Ministers who can span that spectrum. More important, the Chinese were interested because they were, in a sense, talking to 28. What I said, and what I could only say, was what I knew to be the position of all. If they wanted—and they do—to talk to the British specifically, they will do that separately and very effectively.

Interestingly, too, when I met Ministers, I would debrief all the ambassadors of the EU countries who were present. I would meet them before and I would meet them afterwards, because I worked for the 28 nations. In the case of China, they are all there; they would brief me, and I would brief them, but I would be representing them as a whole, and that was important for the countries with which I was talking.

Q251 Nadhim Zahawi: Good morning, Baroness Ashton. Clearly in, say, the Iran nuclear negotiations, the EU and you played an important role successfully, and the sanctions against Russia over the Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea were a great success, but I would suggest that on Syria and Iraq, the EU seems to be absent in the political settlement, which needs a big effort. The military challenge is almost the easier of the two. Why do you think that is? What are the learnings from the successes versus what I would call the failures of EU diplomacy in that arena?

Baroness Ashton: Thank you for the successes, before you go on to the things you don't think are successful. When I was involved in the discussions on Syria, led by the UN, I would argue that we were very much engaged in that, both because we had delegations in Syria and Iraq and the delegation in Syria stayed much longer than many member states were able to. We only left finally because the briefing that I had was sufficiently alarming that I had to get them out—but we went back regularly: there were people going to and from Damascus on a very regular basis.

In Iraq we had a delegation embedded, I think, with the British delegation. In Iraq, partly because there were already key member states engaged with it, the European role was much more about the development issues of the future than the political issues, in truth. Though I spent a lot of time talking with the Iraqi Government—particularly the then Foreign Minister Zebari, who I got to know well—about how we could support Iraq. I went to Irbil and talked with the leaders there about the need to see Iraq's challenges as being for all Iraqi people.

On the Syrian issues that we faced then, we were much more engaged because those issues were about trying to find the peace and the negotiation. Because of the nature of the countries, who are, in the end, crucial to finding the way through, the EU is sometimes able to have those detailed conversations because we were involved with everybody. It is, in a

sense, a bit of a reflection of what happened with the Iran negotiations. I led them for four years. We were accepted and recognised because we had a unique and different position. Crucial though the P5+1 were—I take nothing away; it was their deal—we were able to do it because, from the perspective of the UN Security Council and the Iranians, it worked. I do not rule out that the EU will be engaged in a bigger way as things move forward but, at the point where a new service is coming into being, where these issues are, in a sense, the very dramatic changes that take place, it is perhaps not so surprising that you see either individual countries or our transatlantic partners playing a prominent role.

As a final, general point that I know you will understand, one of the biggest challenges that I saw when I was working was that a lot of what you do is under the radar. The number of visits you have to places, the deep conversations you have, the negotiations you are involved in, who you are talking to—you do not want that out there in the public domain. There is a sense, inevitably, that that is therefore not seen until there is a success. Serbia-Kosovo took me a long time, 11 months or so of discussion with them, but when we had done it, it became suddenly very prominent—perhaps less so here but certainly in other parts of Europe. For Iran, I cannot add up the number of days, weeks, months I spent on that. It went along but became more prominent when it was more successful. I am quite sure that there is a lot more going on that is perhaps not so much in the public eye. That is true also for individual diplomats from individual nations because, by its nature, this is not headline news—it shouldn't be.

Q252 Nadhim Zahawi: Drawing on your experience, how do you think some of the key international actors—the US, China, Russia—would react to the UK exiting, deciding to leave, the EU?

Baroness Ashton: I think some of them have already said what they think. Let me divide them up. For the Americans, Britain has always been a close ally and people have talked about the “gateway to Europe”. I am not sure that is so true, because America has very strong relations with France, Germany and many countries, but there has been this relationship; it is there and it is real. I felt the strength of it, because I was British—it became part of that. They feel that, for them, it would be a less good position. They also think it would be less good for us. The Chinese have already said something, I think—somebody told me. They feel, I would imagine, that Britain is a part of Europe for them and they would see us as an important part of it.

The Russians perhaps have a different perspective. I suspect that for some in the Russian Government, Britain leaving would help them to prevent Europe from having strong positions which they do not like. With something such as sanctions, there are always attempts to peel off—always, on any issue. I understand that. A lobbying process goes on in each nation to try to make the situation different from what it is. Holding everybody together is crucial, and Britain plays a big part in that.

Q253 Nadhim Zahawi: Let me play devil's advocate.

Baroness Ashton: Everyone is playing devil's advocate.

Nadhim Zahawi: I know, and I'm going to have a go myself. The UK is a member of NATO and a member of the P5. It has an extensive diplomatic network. Development spending is massive, and defence spending is protected. Why should being outside the EU affect the UK's global influence? It might affect the EU, and therefore they will want to give us a

different deal afterwards, but why should it affect our influence? Look at Iraq. The Germans are doing their own thing, we are doing our own thing and the French are doing their own thing. In reality, as far as we are concerned, it really will not move the dial much, will it?

Baroness Ashton: I am not sure about this idea that the EU will just give us another deal. It would be quite interesting to see what that might look like. However, from spending five years in 104 countries, or whatever it is, and dealing with so many different issues and meeting so many different people, I am 100% certain that nobody can do this alone. There is not a country in the world that operates solo, whether it is as strong as the US or as powerful in the context of its history and position as Britain. Britain does not operate solo now. It is in discussion with allies, and people are talking to the Americans, the Germans and the French. They are doing it through NATO or through the EU. The conversations are 24 hours a day, and they are constant. You operate in a framework that fits what you are trying to do. Working collaboratively on defence with France makes a lot of sense to me. Working with the US makes a lot of sense to me. Dealing with issues where you are trying to spread your influence through the Commonwealth makes a lot of sense to me. These are not questions of either/or, but of both/and.

Looking at the geopolitical challenges that we face, it is blindingly obvious that some of the groupings you have to work with are the countries that are your neighbours, and guess what? Our neighbours are the European Union. You choose how you do that. Over the years, we—successive Governments, with different political views—have chosen to take this and to interweave it in particular ways. Where it goes next is up to this country and the other countries to decide, but the decision was taken because of the belief that both economically and politically, issues do not stop at Dover. This applies to an extent now in foreign policy, but also in all sorts of other ways. Issues don't stop at Dover—climate change doesn't and nor do terrorism and our support for our partners and allies in trying to deal with that, as well as trying to make sure that we are safe. In my view, all of that can only be done collaboratively.

The question that is underneath all of the debate about the EU is what kind of collaboration that is. Even if people feel the desire to withdraw from this kind of institutional framework, for whatever reason, they will in any even find themselves having to collaborate with these countries, and to support the people of Paris and to support countries which are grappling with other issues. The question is: how do you best do that? There is a lot to be said for having the ability to sit together and decide together that we will not allow Russia to simply walk in and take Crimea and let that stand; that we will collaborate to put sanctions on Iran, and work together to support—in this case—me to try to find an agreement; that we will try to work together to have a long-term approach to what we will do to assure the future of Afghanistan.

Any individual country can do bits of these things, of course, and some countries will do more than others. I am extremely proud of our 1.7% and our 2%. I sat through every NATO Foreign Ministers and Defence Ministers meeting, or most of them. I sat on both Councils, so I also saw the benefit to Britain in the context of NATO. It is really important. I also collaborated closely with the Secretary-General of NATO. In Europe, we do work on improvised explosive devices to try to find ways to support those in theatre to be able to deal with these. We work together as the EU to support mid-air refuelling training for countries post-Libya, when it became obvious that many countries don't need it.

Chair: We will come on to that when discuss security policy.

Baroness Ashton: Okay. All of that.

Q254 Daniel Kawczynski: How would you respond to the argument that a Brexit would allow the United Kingdom to focus on a greater, more in-depth relationship with the Commonwealth from a political and economic perspective?

Baroness Ashton: First of all, isn't it wonderful that Patricia Scotland is going to be the next Secretary-General of the Commonwealth? I think it's fantastic. She will do an amazing job. Back to my "it's not either/or, it's both/and". There is a history with the Commonwealth. I have attended the Heads of Government Commonwealth meeting in Perth as a guest of the Foreign Ministers. It is quite interesting to watch it in operation, particularly the Foreign Ministers' side of it. It is not like the EU; it is very different. There is an important way in which you can bring together nations who have a very particular shared history.

I would want to see the Commonwealth strengthened and I did some work to strengthen the EU's relations with the Commonwealth, because this is about countries coming together with common purpose and shared values. Shared values should never be ruled out—they are of deep significance and importance. As Patricia takes over, I hope she will want to deepen and strengthen and encourage Commonwealth nations to work more collaboratively on all sorts of issues. So, too, I hope the EU and the Commonwealth will work together; so it's both, it is not either/or.

Q255 Daniel Kawczynski: I want to put something to you for the record and only time will tell whether or not your answer proves to be correct.

Baroness Ashton: Oh gosh.

Daniel Kawczynski: With regard to trade agreements, we have taken evidence in the past from people who believe we couldn't possibly sign up the same sort of trade agreement with Canada as the European Union has done collectively. I put it to you that here are two countries with the same Head of State, with the same historical and trading links; do you believe that the United Kingdom could not, outside the European Union, secure the same trading agreement with Canada as the European Union has done?

Baroness Ashton: I don't think it's to do with Heads of State and all that. I think it is to do with commercial interest. If you were negotiating as I was, you would be representing to that extent the industries of the nations. If you were negotiating for this country with Canada, it would be British industry that you would be trying to support—the financial services, your exports and markets. That is what they would be doing too. So it is not about the nice warm glow of being countries that get on with each other. I started the Canadian negotiations and remember saying in Canada as we launched them, you all love me now, you are not going to love me by the time we have finished all this, because it is such a difficult and complicated thing to do.

It is about commercial interest. If the offer that you make is that you are going to represent half a billion people and the markets of 28 countries, arguably, what they are willing to give might be better. It does not mean every industry benefits all the time—there is no bilateral trade agreement in the world that can do that for everybody—but you can generally get a much better deal. In the end, by the way, it was 28 Trade Ministers who had to sign off on the deal. They just gave you the mandating power.

You could get a trade deal—lots of countries have trade deals—but would it be better? I would be surprised, because I think that, commercially, for them to want to enter into it, it has

to be worth it. The EU is the biggest grouping that countries can enter into an agreement with, so they are very keen to do it.

Q256 Chair: So your view is that it would be the interests of the Canadians and the other party that decided whether or not it succeeded.

Baroness Ashton: It would be the interests of industry on both sides. If a Minister were negotiating for British industry, they would want to get the best possible deal on tariffs, non-tariff barriers and so on for British industry. They wouldn't sign it if it wasn't good enough, and the question would be: would you have enough of an offer to get whatever country it was to be prepared to do things that in trade deals—trust me—are always painful?

Q257 Chair: Trade was obviously slightly alongside your principal responsibilities, so I want to turn to defence now. The Lisbon treaty refers to “the progressive framing of a common...defence policy” that might “lead to a common defence”. There was not much progress in this area when you were Vice-President. Can you explain why? The answer may be glaringly obvious, but tell us.

Baroness Ashton: First of all, there are quite a lot of interesting views on what that means. The decisions on collaboration on defence that I felt were important were about, as I mentioned before—apologies for jumping ahead—research and development in the main. There were ways in which we could support British and European industry more efficiently. We spend €200 billion a year in Europe on defence. That probably could be spent more efficiently and more cost-effectively if there was more collaboration about what we were buying, so we would bulk-buy, if I can put it as crudely as that.

Q258 Chair: So why was there no progress towards common defence?

Baroness Ashton: Well, I am saying it depends on what you determine to be common defence. In my view, it was about trying to move forward on research and development and better uses of resources, and we did make some progress on that. It was slower—

Q259 Chair: But the truth is that if the UK left the European Union, there would be a chance to progress towards something that looked more like common European defence, isn't it?

Baroness Ashton: I'm not sure that's true, and I'm not sure that the definition of common defence would be the same around the table. Foreign Ministers meet every month. There is a constant discussion going on, so they are very used to working together, thinking through issues and arguing and debating. Defence Ministers meet less often. Chiefs of defence staff meet twice a year to discuss issues. And what you get is a sense that people are more and more thinking—

Q260 Chair: But there is a reason they are not meeting, which is the British, isn't it?

Baroness Ashton: I've never been told that, so I don't know. I think it's just the way the Councils work.

Q261 Chair: But progressing defence co-operation within the European Union has always been anathema to us.

Baroness Ashton: Yes, but you asked me the question: did I think that if the British were not there, it would automatically move into a different direction? I am saying I don't think that is necessarily true.

Q262 Chair: I am challenging that, because without the British leading the charge on not doing defence within the EU, the biggest obstacle to that would be removed, wouldn't it?

Baroness Ashton: But Britain led Atalanta, which was a military mission in Europe, so how does that work? The British were the leading force in Atalanta. The headquarters were here, at Northwood, and it was led at all times by, I think, a British admiral, except for one, when it was a marine commander. They worked as part of this EU group of 12 to 13 nations, putting ships, helicopters and planes out, and the decision that was taken with myself and with the commanders to actually try to destroy the boats on the beach was done. That was a military mission. So I take the point up to a point, but I don't take the point absolutely, because I think Britain does engage.

I think Britain does not wish to go further forward in many aspects of what you might call a Europeanisation of defence. I think that is true of a number of countries. My point about it is that Britain has actually played a significant role on things that it believes to be—where its interests combine and where a European response makes sense, hence a very successful Atalanta. And where it does not think that would work, it does something different. The collaboration with France is bilateral. There are other collaborations within the member states at work.

My focus would be to say, “Okay. That's absolutely fine.” I think it is a very difficult decision to hand over decisions about sending people into theatre. I think that's a domestic democratic decision personally, but I think you could do a lot more to look at how we spend the money better, considering we are working together on lots of these issues, hence my point about work on improvised explosive devices, which we did, and hence my point on helicopter training for Afghanistan, which we did on a European basis. We work closely with NATO on this. We are not trying to do what they do and they do not do what we do, but there are aspects of what Europe does that complement what NATO are doing, and we should stick with that.

Q263 Chair: If we left, would EU policy change—for example, towards the United States and particularly towards Russia?

Baroness Ashton: No, but I think if we left, other things might happen that would change the nature of Europe, so I don't know where that would end up; but I don't think Britain alone is responsible for the position on Russia—there are many countries, not least Germany, who have played a very prominent role in that—and I don't think that relations with the United States rely solely on this country. We are a big part of it, but it is not solely with us. There are lots of nations, not least France and Germany, who have strong relations with the Americans.

Q264 Chair: If we left the European Union wouldn't it enable the remaining member states to actually effect a much more coherent common foreign policy?

Baroness Ashton: No. I think that's—

Chair: Or even a more coherent policy—never mind “much”, I don’t want to sound as if I am playing with words. Surely if we left your successors would have a much easier job. There was a reason it was a Brit to start with, I think, wasn’t there?

Baroness Ashton: Yes, probably—many reasons. The British were not obstructive in that sense, in discussing foreign policy, at all. They were clear about their views. They were pushing hard for the things that they felt were very important; but they met with a huge amount of like-minded response. There are a lot of like-minded people in the whole of Europe. We have a lot in common on many of these issues.

Q265 Chair: But if all that energy was being spent on our own account, managing all the relationships that a nation like us has, rather than having to corral a disparate European Union, isn’t there an argument that we would be better off, and what is left of the European Union would be better off as well, because they haven’t then got to manage British priorities, which as an island with all the links we have off the coast of Europe are inevitably slightly different? There is a different centre of gravity from our European partners on the continent.

Baroness Ashton: With respect, Mr Chairman, I didn’t see much corralling going on. The implication—I am sure that’s not what you meant—is somehow we were this dominant force that corralled all these other countries into a sort of pen and made them do what we wanted. It is not quite like that. There are other countries who consider themselves as big and prominent and strong, and so on, as we do. What I think we have always been very good at is the art of persuasion of people into what we think, and we are looked to for our knowledge and history and experience, for sure, in many European nations. For many countries the idea of Britain not being there is terrible; it’s distressing.

Chair: They’ve told us that.

Baroness Ashton: But it’s true. It’s absolutely true. They think that we are such an important part of this, and they really want us to be part of it; but I don’t think we should belittle them by thinking that somehow we had to get them to do what we wanted. It really, really wasn’t like that. Strong British positions; strong positions from other countries; lots of good and positive debate and a conclusion: it may not have been everything, always, that Britain wanted, but I think they could feel pretty clearly proud of where they got to in a strong European position.

Q266 Mr Baron: Finally, Baroness Ashton, what we are having to grapple with is the cost-benefit analysis of a British exit. Opinion is divided. There are countries like China and the US who say they would like us to stay. They are obviously talking on behalf of their own national interest. Our big business wants us to stay, but there are many who say we should leave—there is more to benefit Britain by leaving. Small business, in particular, is there, and many others as well. Members of P5, the IMF, the World Bank, the Commonwealth, NATO et cetera—there is no shortage of avenues through which to exert our influence as and when we see fit.

But can I bring us back to trade? You made the point earlier that economics equals politics in many respects. There is a close connection there, even with foreign policy. Do you see the advantage—or maybe you don’t—that outside the EU Britain would be freer to negotiate its own trade deals? Sometimes it does get very frustrated at this. Countries as diverse as Tunisia, Canada and Switzerland can negotiate their own trade deals to their advantage; would you accept there is at least an argument on the economic front that Britain

would not have its hands tied and could negotiate these deals without having to go through the bureaucracy of the EU, which sometimes can be not only time-consuming but very frustrating?

Baroness Ashton: I was Trade Commissioner for a bit. So, what happens is that the countries decide who they want to have negotiations with and they push for that. They then work out the mandate that they give to the Commission and the teams go off. It's not actually such a big bureaucratic process. The bureaucracy is that you need experts. I had to learn a whole language of trade, most of which I am pleased to say that I have forgotten, for what you actually have to talk about. We had some extraordinarily brilliant negotiators who understood things that I can only dream of. They would go off and do it within the mandate, and the Commission staff and the Commissioner would report back regularly on where we were. If there were particular issues with particular industries, they would talk to those industries. The car industry is a classic case.

Would the British be able to do better? First, you have to assume that countries want an agreement with one country on its own, and they might. Secondly, going back to my earlier point, the terms on which you get that agreement may not be as good. Certainly, the openings of different markets that countries want often allow for other industries to do extremely well. We did extremely well in some of our markets with South Korea. Thirdly, and slightly flippantly, we haven't done trade negotiations for a long time, so maybe there's a job for me, I don't know.

Mr Baron: Leave on a high note.

Chair: On that note, thank you very much for your time this morning answering our questions.