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**Conference Report One**

**The Diplomatic System of the European Union:  
The State of the Art**

**Loughborough University**

**4-5 December 2009**

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This conference – the first event to be held as part of the Jean Monnet Multilateral Research Network on ‘The Diplomatic System of the European Union’ – was held at Loughborough University on 4-5 December 2009. Twelve papers were delivered by colleagues from the partner universities (Loughborough, Leuven and Maastricht) and associated experts, and the total participation was twenty-seven, with participants including academic colleagues, EU officials, representatives of non-governmental organisations and postgraduate research students. An exceptionally well informed and well received keynote address was delivered at the conference dinner by Cesira D’Aniello, from the Council of the EU. A full programme can be found [here](#) and a list of participants can be found [here](#).

The conference’s key aim was to establish a baseline for the research to be undertaken by partners within the project as it proceeds. The work of the conference was organised in four interconnected sessions, dealing with:

- The context of EU diplomacy (both practical and analytical).
- Institutional approaches and developments.
- The EU’s strategic diplomacy.
- The EU’s structural diplomacy.

Given the early stage of the project at which the conference was held, the aim was as much to generate questions and lines of enquiry as it was to find answers to the key research questions. Thus, each speaker was asked to present a short paper opening up key areas for discussion and giving their perspective on the issues. In the opening session, on the context of EU diplomacy, Brian Hocking, Rebecca Adler-Nissen and David Spence each raised issues about the relationship of EU diplomacy to the changing nature of diplomacy more generally, and to the changing practices characteristic of contemporary diplomatic processes. Hocking focused especially on the evolution of ‘multi-stakeholder diplomacy’, involving both governmental and non-governmental actors, and on the ways in which diplomacy has widened its scope to deal with ‘trade, tourism and terrorism’ alongside its traditional concerns. In such a context, there is an inevitable concern with the roles played by different actors and the rules by which they participate. Adler-Nissen took this discussion further by exploring features of ‘late sovereign’ diplomacy and by raising questions about the purpose of EU diplomacy – is it to mimic the state, or to challenge it? She argued that EU diplomacy is at least in part a system of deliberation, in which diplomacy can be seen as a social process generating characteristic rules and roles, and which serves purposes both within the EU and between the EU and the outside world. Finally, Spence focused strongly on the evolution of EU diplomacy and on the interaction of two systems – the national and the European – which creates issues of role (and role conflict) as well as differences in the ways in which arguments are presented and pursued. He also attempted to identify some of the key issues that might emerge when the External Action Service of the EU is assembled, especially those emerging from the bringing together of different ‘cultures’ of diplomacy.

In the second session, led by colleagues from Maastricht University (Sophie Vanhoonacker and Karolina Pomorska, with Simon Duke from the European Institute of Public Administration), the emphasis was on the institutional development of EU diplomacy and on the ways in which institutionalist approaches might assist analysis of the emerging ‘EU system’. One key focus was on the development (or absence?) of a ‘European diplomatic culture’, and also on the ways in which the evolution of EU diplomacy raised questions about coherence, effectiveness and visibility. One way of exploring the issues might be to ask what were the problems that the new structures of

EU diplomacy were designed to address, and by implication to ask whether we were at a 'critical juncture; in the development of structures and practices. Research on institutional developments at this stage would be conducted almost in 'real time', alongside the emergence of the institutional structures themselves. It was also clear that the development of CFSP might be the centre of gravity of the focus on diplomacy, but that it raised questions about the relationship between CFSP and other areas such as development policy. There was also the question of institutions in a more general sense: could EU diplomacy itself be seen as an institution of the European or broader international orders? It was clear from the discussion that the research challenge of looking at the institutions of EU diplomacy was both important and complex (itself a reflection of some of the issues about multiple actors and issues raised in the opening session). Given that the institutions would be developing and becoming established as the project proceeded, it would be very important to keep abreast of key developments in personnel, budgetary and other aspects as they occurred – but at the same time to be able to explore more general issues of 'diplomatic culture' and practices as suggested by the opening session.

The third conference session, led by Loughborough colleagues, was focused on the exploration of the EU's 'strategic diplomacy' – defined as diplomatic activity aimed at positioning the EU within the world arena, and at managing relations with 'strategic partners'. Michael Smith began by raising a number of general and conceptual issues about the notion of 'strategic diplomacy', by looking at the ways in which key research questions could be framed and operationalised, and by suggesting some key avenues for empirical work. Fundamental to this part of the project was the assumption that the EU is, could be or should aim to be a 'strategic actor', with the capacity to mobilise resources and pursue strategic objectives in a changing world arena. Diplomacy in this context needed to be seen in relation to the establishment of a base for strategic action, and the coordination of strategic action when it was undertaken. One key issue in this respect is the 'space' open to the EU for exploitation in pursuit of its strategic aims: the opportunities available will reflect not only the development of EU diplomacy itself but also the changing texture and focus of the world arena. In this context, EU diplomacy could be seen as performing three types of function: integrative (as part of the European integration project more generally), positional (positioning the EU in relation to other major actors, either proactively or defensively) and relational (cultivating and managing relations with strategic regions or strategic partners). David Allen took up this theme by pointing to a number of areas in which different manifestations of EU diplomacy could be discerned: the accession process for new Member States, the management of the 'neighbourhood', the exploration of inter-regional links, and the development of 'strategic partnerships'. Each of these areas raised issues about the ways in which EU diplomacy confronted and might overcome problems of 'diplomatic structure' (the pattern of relations and institutions within which EU diplomacy was generated) and 'diplomatic practice' (the ways in which EU diplomats put into operation the tools available to them and exploited opportunities arising in the world arena). This raises important questions about the ways in which diplomacy relates to governance, both within the EU and between the EU and the broader world arena, and about the ways in which an EU diplomacy might 'capture' diplomatic activity in key areas of EU interest. More fundamentally, it raises questions about the ways in which an EU diplomacy might reflect an 'EU interest' and 'add value' to diplomatic activity in general. Fraser Cameron provided the perspective of a sceptical observer, by drawing attention to the lack of strategic thinking and debate in relation to the EU's 'strategic partnerships' with countries such as China, India, Russia and Brazil. He also pointed out that the most important of the EU's 'strategic partners' was the USA, and that US foreign policy would be crucial in determining the extent to which the EU had

'diplomatic space' to exploit. Amongst the other 'strategic partners', China attracts more EU attention in the form of visits and other contacts than all others, but the record here is decidedly mixed. Cameron argued that there was a need for a more public EU strategic debate, and also that active efforts should be made to promote an EU 'diplomatic culture', for example through an EU diplomatic academy. Above all, it should be remembered that any EU strategy is itself a product of diplomacy on the part of Member States and relevant institutions.

The final conference session dealt with the notion of an EU 'structural diplomacy' – activity aimed at transforming internal structure within target countries and at engaging in state-building or peace-building in a variety of different contexts. Stephan Keukeleire and Arnout Justaert argued that such a diplomacy is inherently multi-level and that it also involves the management of linkages and coalitions in a variety of intersecting arenas. Unstable contexts, and heterogeneous actors, create major problems of diplomatic management both at the local level and between central and local operations. In this set of processes, dialogue and learning are key aspects and thus research would need to 'get inside' the relevant local diplomatic communities. Patrick Holden took a different perspective by focusing on EU development diplomacy and on the ways in which it reflected the operation of structural power – both at the aggregate level and at the level of local operations. All of the speakers agreed that a focus on structural diplomacy implied the need to study its deep impact on target countries or regions, and on the ways in which structural diplomacy brought together a range of instruments and resources. Such a focus implies specific research methods, centred on the regions and on the actors involved, and exploring the ways in which the EU can 'get under the skin' of the countries in which it is involved. There is also a link here to the notion of 'strategic diplomacy', since it is clear that in at least some cases the EU's involvement is contingent or 'accidental': what problems does this create for the analysis of diplomacy and for the practice of diplomacy itself?

This brief summary of the conference sessions does not do justice to the range of issues and possible research avenues that were touched on in the conference, both in the formal sessions and outside. The partners will be meeting in January to discuss the ways in which research can build on the insights generated by the conference, and the resources of the network can be fully exploited. In addition, a policy paper covering the issues raised at the conference will be produced by the network during February 2010, and circulated widely among academics, officials and others.

**Michael Smith**  
**15.02.10**